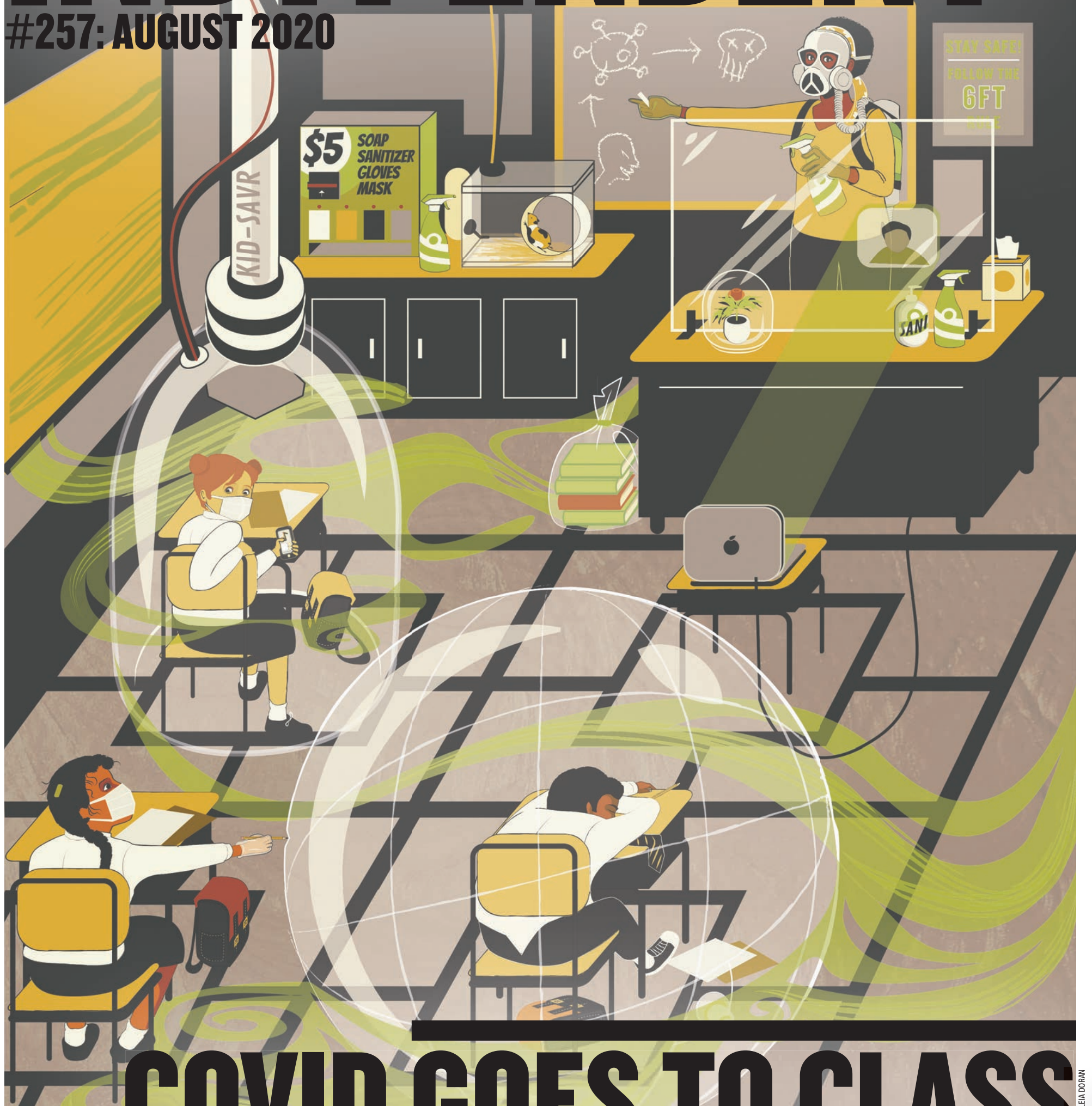


THE

= BLACK LIVES MATTER BIKE RIDE BOOMING — P3 =

# THE INDYPENDENT

#257: AUGUST 2020



## COVID GOES TO CLASS

THE MAYOR IS EAGER TO HAVE KIDS RETURN TO THE CLASSROOM IN SEPTEMBER. BUT IS IT SAFE?

KATYA SCHWENK, P10

LEIA DORAN


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# ONLINE BLACK LIVES MATTER RESOURCES



SUE BRISK

**PROTEST GUIDE**

Centralized information and updates on protests in NYC for Black Lives Matter and George Floyd:  
[justiceforgeorge.nyc/join](http://justiceforgeorge.nyc/join)  
[instagram.com/justiceforgeorgenyc](https://www.instagram.com/justiceforgeorgenyc)

**PETITIONS**

A compiled list of reliable petitions to sign in defense of Black life.  
[blacklivesmatter.carrd.co/#petitions](https://blacklivesmatter.carrd.co/#petitions)

**MEETING**

Anti-Eviction Training:  
[bit.ly/39z9FqG](http://bit.ly/39z9FqG)  
Weekly meeting to discuss and take part in the cancel rent campaign.

**DATABASE**

Prison Abolition: A Curated Collection of Links:  
[bit.ly/2CMYQKB](http://bit.ly/2CMYQKB)  
In these records you will find the most recent and the most authoritative articles on the topics, people and events that are shaping the criminal justice conversation.

**ARCHIVE**

Black Archives:  
[blackarchives.co](http://blackarchives.co)  
[blvckvrchives.com](http://blvckvrchives.com)  
A collaborative multimedia platform featuring archival histories and modern day stories from across the Diaspora.

**REPARATIONS**

Resource Generation:  
[resourcegeneration.org](http://resourcegeneration.org)  
A multiracial membership community of young people with wealth and/or class privilege committed to the equitable distribution of wealth, land and power.

**DATABASE**

Black-led Worker Co-ops to Support:  
[nycworker.coop/blackcoopsmatter](http://nycworker.coop/blackcoopsmatter)

**DATABASE**

175 Black Healers and Wellness Spaces:  
[bit.ly/3g9aQzx](http://bit.ly/3g9aQzx)  
This is a list of 175+ incredible Black herbalists, healers, doulas and energy workers.

**ZINE**

"Assata's Testimony":  
[bit.ly/2CZEx7M](http://bit.ly/2CZEx7M)  
A zine that features an interview with former Black Panther Assata Shakur about her treatment by police and prison guards when she was arrested in 1973. Shakur escaped from a New Jersey state prison in 1979 and fled to Cuba where she lives to this day.

**FILM**

13th:  
[bit.ly/3f1SqqQ](http://bit.ly/3f1SqqQ)  
Director Ava DuVernay's examination of the U.S. prison system looks at how the country's history of racial inequality drives the high rate of incarceration of any country in the world.

**FILM**

The Space Traders:  
[bit.ly/spacetrade](http://bit.ly/spacetrade)  
Extraterrestrials arrive on Earth and offer to the United States gold, safe nuclear power and other technological advances, in exchange for the government's handing over of all Black U.S. citizens.

**STAY ON TOP OF IT:** ...With these helpful links.

**FILM**

The Spook Who Sat by the Door:  
[bit.ly/2CMzt6V](http://bit.ly/2CMzt6V)  
The fictional story of Dan Freeman, the first Black CIA officer and of the CIA's history of training persons and political groups who later used their specialised training in gathering intelligence, political subversion, and guerrilla warfare against the CIA.

**FILM**

Tongues Tied:  
[vimeo.com/ondemand/tonguesuntied](https://vimeo.com/ondemand/tonguesuntied)  
Filmmaker Marlon Riggs gives a voice to communities of gay black men, presenting their cultures and perspectives on the world as they confront racism, homophobia and marginalization.

— INDYPENDENT STAFF

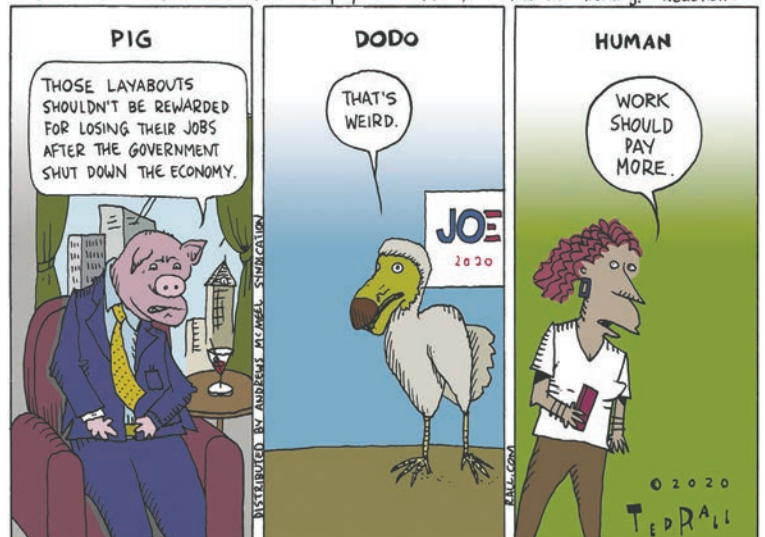
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### WHICH POLITICAL ANIMAL ARE YOU?

2/3 of Americans earned more from Unemployment + \$600/week than from working. Reaction?





SUE BRISK

# PEDAL POWER

## WEEKLY BLACK-LED BIKE RIDES DRAW THOUSANDS OF CYCLISTS

BY KIARA THOMAS

**F**ifteen thousand bicyclists converged on Gracie Mansion this July, protesting police brutality and racism and calling on Mayor Bill de Blasio to reform or disband the NYPD.

Their shirts soaked in sweat, protesters biked in 90-degree heat from meetup points in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens, where they united at the Unisphere in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park. Although the participants were encouraged to wear blue to symbolize the water that connects cultures, most didn't know where they were headed until the end of the ride. Despite that they stopped traffic and halted business-as-usual the entire way there.

"We figured, 'You guys pull up to our neighborhoods and bother us all the time. We'll pull up to your crib and bother you a little bit,'" said Orlando Hamilton, co-founder of Street Riders NYC, a weekly, roving Black Lives Matter protest pedaling through a neighborhood near you.

"In our rides, we have people from all over," Hamilton added. "It's not a couple of people complaining in the Bronx or a couple of people complaining in Brownsville. It's a whole community of people that feel like 'What the fuck you guys are doing with your system is not working for us.'"

It was Hamilton and fellow Street Riders co-founder Peter Kerre's seventh bike protest when *The Independent* caught up with them. Riders are regularly met with police cars and helicopters during their rides, and so the organizers wait to tell their 50 or so volunteers the final destination of each ride in order to avoid interference from law enforcement. The number of participants on each trek continues to grow, with their passion for the Black Lives Matter movement turning many from riders into medics, mechanics and traffic blockers.

"Just seeing how many people support the cause and try to make a change, knowing that I want to make a change myself," said Justin Seaborough, an 18-year-old traffic blocker from Harlem, describing what drives him to take part.

The bike rides are one of many forms Black Lives Matter demonstrations have taken nationwide following the death of George Floyd while in Minneapolis police custody in May. Through marches, sit-ins, street art, the destruction of monuments and regular pedal protests in New York each Saturday, protesters are calling for an end to systemic racism and for justice for those who died at the hands of law enforcement.

"The 'get your knee off my neck' that literally all of America was able to see with George Floyd has been a part of my experience throughout life and a lot of Black people's experience throughout life in general," Althea Smith, a Westchester resident said at the July demonstration. "It's unfortunate for somebody to get killed in broad daylight, for everyone to see that."

Street Riders NYC has led over 60,000 bikers to date. The rides grew out of the tactic of individual bikers and people on scooters protecting marchers from traffic at other protests.

Hamilton, a laid-off chef who had never been an activist before, and Kerre, a music producer and filmmaker, began to see familiar faces at protests and formed friendships. They exchanged contact information and established themselves with their first cycling protest in June. Now they're leading the larg-

est collective bike rides in New York City history.

The demonstrations follow in the footsteps (of is it tracks?) of past cycling movements for social justice, such as Critical Mass, which regularly shut down New York City's traffic arteries in the 1990s and early aughts.

In a way, Critical Mass was propaganda by deed: Demonstrators called for safer streets at a time when the city had few dedicated bike lanes. They were often met with gratuitous brutality from the NYPD. The cyclists also used their mass power to rally in opposition to the Iraq War and denounce the Giuliani-era gentrification around them, among other social causes.

Kerre's own activism was shaped by his encounters with police brutality while living in Minneapolis and he has been advocating against racist policing for years.

"Living in Minneapolis as a Black person, you'd be hunted by the police," he said. "Just existing as a Black person, it's crazy. Police in Minneapolis have been out of control for a while."

The video of Floyd's killing brought back painful memories for Hamilton as well. He was a teenager when his friend Elwood White was fatally shot by Deputy Michael Astorga of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department in 2012 after showing signs of being mentally unstable, speaking incoherently and attacking people.

"The police killed my homie when I was 15," he said. "They never even got desk duty or nothing. They stayed on the beat and I ain't never got over

### READY TO RIDE:

Cyclists gathered in Brooklyn Cadman Plaza on July 25th before continuing their ride.

### FOLLOW ME:

Orlando Hamilton is a co-founder of Street Riders NYC which leads the Justice Bike Rides every Saturday.

## THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS ON EACH TREK CONTINUES TO GROW.

it." Now he says, "Whenever we are protesting the police, I'm there."

Street Riders NYC covers its expenses out of pocket and avoids soliciting donations, but that hasn't stopped supporters from showing their appreciation. Two weeks ago, one found the organizers' Cash App profiles and shared them online. They've been taking in funds since.

Every Thursday they train new volunteers at McCarren Park in Brooklyn and are looking for a more permanent place to store their equipment.

"This is not a trend or the height of the movement," Kerre said. "There is a lot of stuff that is planned for the future. We are only beginning. We are going all out. We will serve the community the best we can."

Kerre and Hamilton plan to continue the demonstrations every Saturday. Keep up with them on Instagram: @StreetRidersNYC.



SUE BRISK



SUE BRISK

# A FAMILY DEMANDS JUSTICE

## AFTER JAMEL FLOYD IS PEPPER SPRAYED TO DEATH BY GUARDS AT BROOKLYN JAIL

BY KIARA THOMAS

**T**wo months after the death of Jamel Floyd, his family and friends continue to fight for justice, protesting weekly outside of the Metropolitan Detention Center, where Floyd died after correction officers pepper-sprayed him in his cell.

The results from the independent autopsy are expected on Aug. 11 after an autopsy performed by the New York City medical examiner's office listed the cause of Floyd's death as inconclusive. They hope the second autopsy, which includes genetic and microscopic testing, will shed light on the death of the 35-year-old.

"This hurts to the bottom of my heart but we are going all the way to fight for justice for him," James Floyd, Jamel's father, said. "We pray that justice would be served and that they shut this jail down first and foremost."

Last month, family and friends of Floyd attended his funeral. Although Floyd's story has unfolded almost entirely outside the eye of the media, he was a well-known athlete in Hempstead, a sprawling Long Island town located about 22 miles east of the Metropolitan Detention Center in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

"Their coaches used to run around trying to get them to play because they were the best baseball players," said Donna Mays, Floyd's mother, recalling Floyd and his siblings when they were young.

At a moment of unprecedented scrutiny of police misconduct, Floyd's death stands out as another shocking case of brutality and callousness by law enforcement. According to Floyd's family, officials at the federal jail knew he was asthmatic and diabetic. Correctional officers nevertheless pepper-sprayed him in his cell on June 3.

According to the Bureau of Prisons, Floyd broke his cell door with a metal object that morning and "became increasingly disruptive and potentially harmful to himself and others."

After the pepper-spraying incident, Floyd was removed from his cell. Medical staff found him unresponsive and performed "life-saving measures." He was later pronounced dead at a local hospital.

Floyd's parents learned about his passing through the media the day he died. His parents said they tried calling the Metropolitan Detention Center and didn't get a response.

The Department of Justice's Office of the Inspector General says it is looking into the incident in coordination with the FBI, but has refrained from commenting further. Legal aid and rights groups are calling for an independent investigation. They want video footage to be preserved to determine whether excessive force was used.

"Pepper spray, under normal circumstances, when it's used the way it's supposed to be used, is not supposed to be fatal," Jose Saldana, director of the organization Release Aging People in Pris-

### DEMANDING ANSWERS:

A cousin of Jamel Floyd outside the jail where he was killed.

### LONG GOODBYE:

Jamel Floyd's father James says goodbye at his son's funeral.

on, told CNN. "But when it's used excessively, it might trigger a heart attack or something else that may lead to someone dying. They had to have done

something in addition to just giving a regular dose of pepper spray."

Floyd was in the hospital the Friday before his death due to an assault by correction officers, according to his family.

"We know the cause of death, but they're acting like they don't know," Mays said. "It didn't look like an asthma attack, doesn't look like a heart attack and it doesn't look like anything genetic that they need to look at our genetics for. His hands have defense wounds."

Floyd, who was set to be released in 120 days following a 2007 burglary conviction, was moved from state prison to the federal facility in Oct. 2019. It is unclear why, although his mother told NBC News in June that it "had to do with a particular case and that he was supposed to be protected."

Family members say he endured regular mistreatment at the Metropolitan Detention Center, where inmates weren't allowed regular showers and there was not enough heat in the winter.

"I'm hurt," said Floyd's younger brother, Ramel. "It's disgusting how the system works. How you go to extract someone out of a cell and they end up dead. It took the media for us to find out what took place as opposed to a phone call. The whole process

## THE RESULTS FROM AN INDEPENDENT AUTOPSY ARE EXPECTED AUGUST 11.

of it is disgusting. It's dehumanizing. The first time we got to visit him was in a morgue."

The last time Floyd saw his family was in February before the facility was locked down due to the pandemic. He and Ramel planned to get their CDL license to start a moving business together. His girlfriend Shaquanna Wright was looking forward to being called Mrs. Floyd.

"No matter what a person is in jail for, no matter what they did, they don't deserve to die at all — especially like that," Wright said.



SUE BRISK



VERALD PEREZ

# A PANDEMIC OF EVICTIONS LOOMS

## TENANT GROUPS IN NEW YORK & AROUND THE COUNTRY URGE LAWMAKERS TO CANCEL RENT

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

Millions of Americans could face losing their homes soon, as the end of various moratoriums on evictions overlaps with the expiration of extra unemployment benefits for people who lost work in the COVID-19 epidemic.

Almost 12 million households nationwide could receive eviction notices in the next four months, the Chicago-based consulting firm Stout projects, based on figures from a Census Bureau survey released July 22. In New York State, it estimates that there will be more than 1 million eviction cases filed in the next four months — more than 12 times the usual average of 80,000.

“The levels are inconceivable,” says Jenny Laurie, executive director of Housing Court Answers.

Even before the epidemic crashed the economy, more than half of New York City’s renters were already spending more than 30 percent of their income on rent, according to city Rent Guidelines Board figures. In the Bronx, more than one-third of residents spend more than half of their income.

Now, says Kim Statuto, a tenant leader with Community Action for Safe Apartments in the southwest Bronx, more than half of the residents of her Claremont Village building are having trouble paying their full rent, and “some can’t pay, period.” In the surrounding neighborhood, she estimates that up to three-fourths are having trouble. Some people have been waiting four months to receive unemployment benefits. And workers in restaurants that closed “are not getting their jobs back.”

As *The Independent* goes to press, much remains up in the air, particularly whether the federal \$600-a-week supplement to unemployment benefits, which expires July 31, will be renewed. A ban on evictions for nonpayment in housing that receives federal aid, from the same March relief bill, expired on July 24.

State restrictions on evictions from early in the pandemic are also eroding. According to Princeton University’s Eviction Lab database, Texas allowed eviction proceedings to resume May 19, California on May 31, North Carolina on June 21 and Michigan on July 15.

In New York, landlords are currently able to get a

court to order tenants to pay back rent they owe, but not to get them thrown out of their apartments. But Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s executive order halting evictions is scheduled to expire Aug. 6. The Tenant Safe Harbor Act, which lets tenants use having lost income in the pandemic as a defense against eviction, will expire Aug. 20.

Without deeper rent relief, Lisa Macauley of the Metropolitan Council on Housing said in an online anti-eviction forum July 15, those measures were just “prolonging the inevitable” for tenants who lost their jobs. The Stout study estimated that New York State tenants already owed \$2.2 billion in back rent as of July 15. And proving that they lost income is difficult for those who didn’t have a consistent paycheck, such as freelance workers,

tipped workers and undocumented immigrants who work off the books.

In July, the state launched a program to provide \$100 million in rent relief for tenants who were already paying more than 30 percent of their income for rent before the epidemic. If they could prove they’d lost income, it would cover the difference between 30 percent of their current income and their rent. Applications, open for two weeks, closed July 30.

Esteban Giron, a leader in the Crown Heights Tenant Union, called it “a lottery for a little bit of money.”

“They need to cancel rent. I don’t know what Cuomo is waiting for,” says Statuto.

### HOUSING COURT RETURNS

Meanwhile, the legal machinery of eviction is slowly creaking back to life. In New York City, landlords have been able to file eviction cases by mail since June 22, says Jenny Laurie. Brooklyn Housing Court reopened for in-person cases July 27, if both sides have lawyers, and Staten Island’s is scheduled to do the same in early August.

The situation upstate is much different. Rebecca Garrard of the Housing Justice for All coalition describes it as “mass confusion.”

Only Buffalo has a court dedicated to housing cases, she explains. In other cities, it’s handled through civil courts, and in small towns, by local judges who are often not lawyers. Garrard says she is “100 percent certain” that some of these courts won’t give tenants protections they’re entitled to, and some tenants will get scared into moving because they don’t know that a threatening letter from a landlord “is not an eviction notice.”

Another problem, she adds, is that all apartments north of Westchester County are unregulated, so tenants have no legal right to renew their lease.

“The lack of protections tenants have upstate is problematic in the best of times,” Garrard says. Unless the legislature or the courts take action, “we’re going to have a massive wave of evictions.”

### ALBANY HESITATES TO ACT

Three rent-relief bills have been introduced in the state Legislature. One, sponsored by state Sen. Zellnor Myrie (D-Brooklyn) and Assemblymember Karines Reyes (D-Bronx), would ban both residential and commercial evictions for the duration of the state of emergency that began March 7 and one year afterward.

The Rent and Mortgage Cancellation Act of 2020, sponsored by Sen. Julia Salazar (D-Brooklyn) and Assemblymember Yuh-Line Niou (D-Manhattan), would cancel all rent due from residential tenants from March 7 until 90 days after the end of the crisis. It would also create a fund to compensate small landlords, cooperatives, affordable-housing providers and public housing authorities for lost income. To be eligible for aid, landlords would have to freeze rents for five years, not evict anyone without good cause and maintain safe buildings.

The third, sponsored by Sen. Brian Kavanagh (D-Manhattan/Brooklyn) and Assemblymember Steven Cymbrowitz (D-Brooklyn), would create a Housing Assets Voucher Program, a Section 8-style rent subsidy to aid low-income homeless people or those “on the brink of becoming homeless,” says Lourdes Melo of Neighbors Together in Bedford-Stuyvesant/Brownsville.

All three have been accumulating cosponsors, says Housing Justice for All campaign coordinator Cea Weaver.

“The problem is the legislature is reluctant to act until there’s movement out of Washington,” she says. “We need them to be more proactive.”

On a further-reaching and national level, the Homes Guarantee coalition is calling for the federal government to build 12 million units of “social housing” over the next 10 years. Its goal is “moving housing from a commodity to a human right,” one member said at a July 23 online forum. Possible forms include below-market rentals, limited-equity co-ops and community land trusts.

The looming eviction crisis, Weaver cautions, is going to be more of a “slow boil” than thousands of people getting thrown out immediately on Aug. 6, to be dramatically defended by protesters doing eviction blockades. It’s going to move at a bureaucratic pace, “people going to Housing Court and losing cases. And then another round of people going to Housing Court and losing cases.”

“We are going to be doing blockades,” she continues, but people need to be prepared for more prosaic actions, like “showing up in solidarity with your neighbors in Housing Court” before they lose their case and face eviction.

Three goals for the movement, she adds, are extending the right to counsel to all tenants, slowing down eviction proceedings and organizing people to know their rights.

**FOR ADVICE ABOUT DEFENDING YOURSELF AGAINST EVICTION, CALL THE MET COUNCIL TENANT HOTLINE AT (212) 979-0611. IT’S OPEN MONDAY FROM 1:30-8PM; TUESDAY, 5:30-8PM; WEDNESDAY, 1:30-8PM; AND FRIDAY, 1:30-5PM.**

### MIC CHECK NOT RENT CHECK:

*Kim Statuto, a tenant leader with Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA), speaks in front of Bronx Housing Court earlier this year.*



GARY MARTIN

# PARTY ON

BY JOHN TARLETON

**T**remaine Wright served on her neighborhood's community board for more than a decade before being elected to the State Assembly in 2016. When State Senator Velmanette Montgomery, a 35-year incumbent, announced she would not seek re-election, she endorsed Wright to be her successor in Senate District 25 which stretches from Bedford-Stuyvesant to Red Hook.

Wright also gained the backing of her fellow Brooklyn elected officials, labor unions and Democratic Party clubs. Normally, Wright's ascent to a potentially decades-long stint in the state Senate would have been more a coronation than a contest. But these aren't normal times for New York City's once-invincible Democratic Party machines.

On election night, Wright found herself trailing Jabari Brisport, a public school teacher and a democratic socialist who has never held public office, by 12 points. When mail-in votes were counted in mid-July, Brisport's lead grew to 18 points and he declared victory as New York's first out-LGBTQ Black state senator.

Brisport's demolition of a machine-backed candidate was duplicated across the city. Incumbents Félix Ortiz (Sunset Park), Walter Mosley (Fort Greene) and Aravella Simotas (Astoria) were all ousted from the state Assembly by first-time candidates backed by the Democratic Socialist of America.

"Let today's results be a lesson to incumbents all across the city," tweeted Aaron Taube of the Queens DSA Electoral Working Group. "Live every day like you're being primaried by a charismatic socialist with a national grassroots fundraising base and a volunteer operation the likes of which you can't even imagine."

Other progressive groups got in on the fun too.

\*The Justice Democrats backed middle school principal Jamaal Bowman who defeated hawkish 31-year congressman Eliot Engel in a district that encompasses parts of the Bronx and Westchester County.

\*The Working Families Party played a major role in the Bowman race. WFP also backed Jessica González-Rojas in her victory over a pale male incumbent whose sell-by date for repping an increasingly diverse district in Western Queens had passed. It also got behind

Khaleel Anderson, a 24-year-old community activist who won an open assembly seat in Southeastern Queens over the machine's preferred candidate.

\*Emily Gallagher edged out 24-term incumbent Joseph Lentol to win a North Brooklyn assembly seat. Gallagher was backed by NY Communities for Change and the New Kings Democrats, an Obama-era reform group that has wrangled with the Brooklyn Democratic machine over the past decade.

Why is this happening now?

It begins with the ideological divide between older and younger Democrats that emerged in Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential run. Two years later, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez shattered the myth that challenging an incumbent was a fool's errand in her historic congressional primary victory against Joe Crowley.

Turns out the machine is a hollow shell, a monopoly whose product appeals to relatively few people but thrived because it could smother any competition with big donor money, endorsements and arcane ballot access rules. Since a real opposition finally got organized, the machine has been overwhelmed. Brisport told The Independent he had 1,000 volunteers participate in his campaign. According to Brisport, his campaign made 350,000 phone calls. He also set a record for most donors in a state legislative race with 7,500 who donated a total of \$280,000. The other DSA candidates mobilized similar grassroots efforts on their behalf.

Here in the City, the floodgates will pour open in next year's municipal elections with all citywide offices plus 35 out of 51 Council seats open. Ditto for state and congressional primaries in 2022.

Like the moa, the giant flightless bird who dwelled undisturbed in New Zealand for millennia before humans landed on the island, a whole generation of mediocre machine politicians could disappear in a relative blink of the eye. They won't be missed. Climbing the ladder for its own sake left them too compromised to fight effectively for their working class constituents or even their own political survival.

Their replacements have vowed to be fierce grassroots organizers inside and outside the halls of power fighting for the many not the few. It can't happen a moment too soon.

## BRIEFING ROOM

BY INDEPENDENT STAFF

### PROPUBLICA RELEASES (SOME) NYPD DISCIPLINARY RECORDS

*ProPublica* has released thousands of NYPD disciplinary records, following the state legislature's repeal of New York's "50-a" law, which kept the records confidential, in June. Last month, a judge issued a temporary restraining against the New York Civil Liberties Union in response to a lawsuit from unions representing the city's police, firefighters and corrections officers seeking to prevent the release of the information. The nonprofit investigative news website, however, is not subject to the ruling. *ProPublica's* online database of complaints filed with and investigated by the Civilian Complaint Review Board omits about 9 percent of the records, those which the CCRB has determined to be unfounded, yet it features more than 20,000 abuse of authority complaints and nearly 8,000 allegations of excessive force, including 244 chokehold incidents. It is available at [projects.propublica.org/nypd-ccrb/](https://projects.propublica.org/nypd-ccrb/).

### WILL NYC'S 5 DAs ENFORCE NEW CHOKEHOLD LAW?

New York City's district attorneys are resisting calls to enforce new anti-police brutality statutes enacted by the City Council in June. These include a ban on chokeholds and a law making it illegal for NYPD officers to sit, stand or kneel on a suspect's neck or chest. DAs in the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island have said they won't prosecute the so-called "diaphragm law" with SI's Michael McMahon criticizing it as "overreaching." According to public comments made by the NYPD's Chief of Department, Terence Monahan, all five of the city's DAs have agreed not to prosecute the chokehold ban. He urged officers not to fear legal repercussions in deploying chokeholds. The department's own patrol guide already bans chokeholds, as does state law.

### COUNCIL SPEAKER DEFUNDS GROUP THAT PROTESTED FOR POLICE DEFUNDING

They organized a protest outside of City

**BE BACK SOON:** After 21 years on the Lower East Side, the radical bookstore *Bluestockings* is looking for a new home.

Hall in June, calling on the City Council to defund the NYPD. Now the City Council is defunding them. While the lawmakers failed to make the meaningful cuts to the police department's budget that protesters demanded, they did manage to cut \$2.5 million in funds allocated to VOCAL-NY, the racial and economic justice group that initiated the Occupy City Hall demonstrations. The funds were slated to help the organization establish a new headquarters. In a statement, VOCAL accused Council Speaker Cory Johnson of engaging in "overt political retaliation." Asked by reporters about the allegations, Johnson became evasive, had a coughing fit and began drinking water, saying the cuts had nothing to do with the protests. Thirty-five council seats are up for grabs in next year's elections. After strong showings in this summer's state and congressional Democratic primaries, the party's insurgent left-wing has vowed to replace councilmembers who have stripped communities of resources and who continue to resist cuts to the NYPD.

### BLUESTOCKINGS SHUTS DOWN LOWER EAST SIDE STOREFRONT

After 21 years, a staple of New York left-wing counterculture on the Lower East Side is shutting its doors. The collectively-run Bluestockings Bookstore, Cafe & Activist Center hosted thousands of readings, trainings and workshops over the years, often geared to New York's most vulnerable — queer, sex worker, disabled and people-of-color communities. But, when its landlord demanded more money, Bluestockings was ultimately a victim of the gentrification many of the titles in its bookstore railed against. "We know our movements need spaces — to share and grow and learn and build alongside each other," Bluestockings said in a statement announcing its closure in July. Members of the collective are currently looking for a new space, one which is larger and offers more accessibility options.

BLUESTOCKINGS (CC BY-ND 4.0)

# HOW NYC LEARNED TO LOVE AUSTERITY

BY JOHN TARLETON

**O**n June 30, the New York City Council approved a budget with billions of dollars in cuts as the city continues to reel from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the city's schools to its parks and libraries to its support for the arts — almost every department and agency will take a hit. And there may be worse to come as the city's budget blues could continue well into 2021 and 2022.

New York has been down this path before. And while there are some significant differences between the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s and the emergency we face today, the similarities are striking as well, especially the harm that could be done to the city's multi-racial working class.

To help make sense of this moment, we spoke with Kim Phillips-Fein, a professor of history at New York University and author of *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis And The Rise of Austerity Politics*. Published in 2017, *Fear City* is widely considered to be the definitive account of the fiscal crisis that did so much to shape the neoliberal politics and the economics of the New York we live in today.

*What is your reaction to the budget that was passed by the City Council and the impact it will have on the people of New York City?*

This is a pretty depressing budget. The budget features substantial cuts at a moment of real crisis. These cuts threaten to make the city's problems worse by raising unemployment and by ending important services. But more deeply, the city's inability to invest in public health and in the improvements that might make it possible for schools to open safely reflects a failure to meet the demands of the health crisis in a meaningful way.

*Cycling back to the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s, can you describe what that was and why our understanding of what happened then is relevant today?*

In the early 1970s, there was a growing gap between New York City's expenses and its revenues. For some time, the city tried to paper this over in different ways, primarily through short-term borrowing and by disguising the gap in its budget. Eventually there ceased to be a market for the city's debt. The banks that financed the city said that they would no longer do so. Over most of 1975, the city actually looked like it might have to go bankrupt or default on its debt and enter into bankruptcy court because there was no clear way that it was actually going to continue to meet its payroll.

At the end of that year, the federal government came forward with a set of loans — buttressed by public sector worker unions that bought a lot of city debt — on the condition that the city move towards a truly balanced budget and make a set of intense budget cuts that ultimately led to the layoffs of about 20 percent of the municipal workforce.

This was a very sharp reduction of resources at a moment when the city was reeling from a set of political and economic problems — rising poverty, a much higher homicide rate than we have today, a wave of arson in the South Bronx and Bushwick.

*In the conventional retelling of the fiscal crisis, the intense austerity that was imposed on New York is presented as a morality tale about how a city that lived beyond its means got its comeuppance.*

New York in the post-World War II period had a very ambitious, expansive city government. There was a much larger public hospital system. The public transit was unparalleled, as was the library system and the parks. In the City University of New York, it had a free public university that was growing and expanding its student body and its number of campuses over the post-war years.

But what tripped up the city wasn't just that it had all these expenses. It also got caught in the snare of federal policies that had encouraged suburban flight and deindustrialization and local policies that failed to keep the city's industrial base. There was also the deregulation of the financial sector in the 1970s, which meant that many banks were less interested in municipal debt than they had been earlier. These factors together among others are why the city was not solely responsible for the problems it faced. It was caught in this moment of change. That's really what led to the fiscal crisis.

*Then as now, there was a Republican administration in Washington with Gerald Ford as president and the famous Daily News headline, "Ford to City: Drop Dead." We seem to be facing a similar indifference from the Trump administration right now.*

The Ford administration was actually split in some ways about New York. Ford's vice president was Nelson Rockefeller, who had been the governor of New York State and had overseen the expansion of debt in both New York City and State. On the other side, there was a set of people, including Treasury Secretary William Simon, who came out of the municipal bonds industry, who was furiously, ideologically opposed to aiding New York. Ford's chief of staff Donald Rumsfeld was also very intensely opposed. They believed the city was too generous, that it was an example of liberalism in microcosm and that the city's failure would teach a lesson to any government, including the federal government, of the dangers of entitlement programs.

You can hear echoes of that in Mitch McConnell saying there would be no "blue state bailouts." But there are differences as well. Today, there is an absence of commitment from the federal government to devising any coherent national response to the pandemic. The airlines can get more than tens of billions of dollars in federal bailouts while it's unclear if public schools can be safely re-opened in the fall.

With Trump, there's the additional irony: he really got his start in Manhattan real estate coming out of the 1975 fiscal crisis with property tax breaks that he was able to get from the city as it attempted to rebuild its image as an exciting, glamorous place to do business.

*So how was the fiscal crisis resolved at the expense of New York's multiracial working class and in favor of the bankers?*

The city went through this really wrenching set of budget cuts. Hospitals and health clinics were closed. Drug treatment programs were canceled. There was disinvestment in transit even as fares rose. Thousands of teachers were laid off. Class sizes swelled, sometimes up to 45 or 50 kids per class. Arts and music programs in the schools were cut. The school day was actually shortened for a period of time by about 90

*Continued on next page*



PHIL ROEDER

# RETHINKING CHILD CARE

## SCHOOL REOPENING CONTROVERSY POSES FALSE CHOICE FOR PARENTS

BY ELIZABETH PALLEY

**S**hould parents stay home with their children during the pandemic and risk losing their jobs and the much-needed income they provide? Or must they send their kids to school and childcare and risk them becoming infected and sharing COVID-19 with the rest of the family?

This is the false choice parents are currently being subjected to. There's no reason we can't protect ourselves from this dreaded disease and keep families economically stable at the same time. Now is the time to talk about a national childcare policy, a child allowance, paid family leave and universal healthcare that is not tied to employment.

Existing childcare in the United States is woefully inadequate and unaffordable for many. It involves a patchwork of childcare centers, pre-K, family care, nannies and unlicensed care. Despite the massive movement of women into the workforce beginning in the 1950s, we have never had a unitary federal policy to address childcare.

We provide some minimal tax benefits primarily for the middle and upper classes and subsidize some care for the poor. Those in between and those who are poor and technically eligible but unable to find a spot for their child are left to fend for themselves despite the high cost of care, which is predicted to rise as a result of efforts to reduce enrollment to comply with safety requirements to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Thanks to the pandemic, the Center for Law and Social Policy estimates that childcare centers need a \$9.6 billion bailout per month as a result of their unexpected closures and the need for lower child-to-staff ratios and new sanitary guidelines. Instead of just bailing out the patchwork childcare system we currently have, let's go all-in on creating the comprehensive one we need.

We also need free universal healthcare for all, including childcare workers. Between 11 and 15 percent of workers are currently unemployed in the United States. As COVID-19 continues to spread, it seems likely that this number will increase. Those who get sick will still need healthcare as someone who is sick usually cannot work. As a result, it does not and has never made sense for healthcare to be tied to employment.

All workers need paid family leave as well. Those in high-risk jobs such as childcare providers have a special need for this leave so that they are not encouraged to return to work when

### WASH, RINSE, REPEAT:

A custodial worker in Des Moines prepares for a limited return of students scheduled to begin in August.

they have not fully recovered and put others at risk. When people are ill or need to care for sick relatives, they still need income to pay for food and housing. If they have any contagious illness,

they risk sharing it with co-workers (and children in the case of teachers and childcare workers) if they return to work.

This was true before COVID-19.

Research on California's paid family leave policy by the National Partnership for Women in 2018 demonstrated that it did not hurt businesses but rather reduced their costs as a result of reduced employee turnover the Families First Coronavirus Response Act provides two weeks of fully paid sick leave for quarantined employees or employees needing to care for children without childcare as a result of COVID-19. It also provides an additional 10 weeks of 2/3 pay if the employee does not have childcare as a result of COVID-19.

That is a great start but parents will need this benefit extended if schools and childcare centers are not able to fully open safely in the fall. These two weeks of paid leave and the 10-week extension should be made permanent and should apply to all illnesses and not just the coronavirus.

We also need to pay some parents to stay home and care for their children. This is not a radical idea. Many European countries provide government support for children. In 2018, Germany provided paid leave for new parents and subsidized childcare. Paid families received on average 200 Euros (\$250) a month per child without harm to the economy.

The \$1,200 stimulus check that families received this spring was a good first step but families continue to need assistance. This need will only grow as more people lose work as a result of the pandemic. Some parents will need to cut back on working hours to care for and educate children.

Capitalism needs families to care for and raise the children who will become its future workers and consumers. But it seeks to displace all the costs onto them.

If we can bail out banks and corporations, why can we not bail out families and children?

*Elizabeth Palley is a professor of social work at Adelphi University and co-author of In Our Hands: The Struggle for U.S. Childcare Policy.*

## NYC AUSTERITY

Continued from Page 7

minutes. There were also cuts to the fire department, to police, sanitation, to shared resources such as the parks and libraries that, taken together, represented an assault on the collective life of the city.

In many cases, spending did not begin to rise again until the late '80s. In the case of CUNY, hardly anyone has talked about returning to free tuition. It's not as if the rollback of free tuition was an emergency plan that was repealed after things got better for the city.

More broadly, the thinking regarding city government shifted. What crystallizes coming out of the fiscal crisis is a sense of the ultimate weakness of the state and its dependence on private economic actors. Therefore, you need to do anything you can to craft policy to attract corporations and wealthy individuals and that's what

should guide the city's thinking.

*Even more than the coronavirus, the greatest threat to New York's long-term future may be the dramatic reduction in government services that sends the city into a downward spiral amid a pandemic and mass unemployment and causes people to flee in ever larger numbers, further eroding the tax base.*

*Given that, should city leaders go against 40-plus years of orthodoxy and ask the State of New York for permission to borrow money on the private markets to cover its budget deficits instead of enacting draconian budget cuts?*

I don't think that borrowing money is actually going to be a solution here in the long run. My concern is that it would defer the political question about how to pay for New York's government to the future and that it would empower the city's creditors. Instead, I think the city needs to address

its problems more directly and to keep pushing for higher taxes on wealthy New Yorkers, as well as a revision of state and national priorities.

I also think that the questions about what the city spends its money on should be echoed on the national level. Moving money from police to social services is a good start. But why should the military budget remain untouched in the throes of a public health disaster?

*Finally, can you talk a little bit about the resistance to austerity that took place in New York during the 1970s and what we can learn from that.*

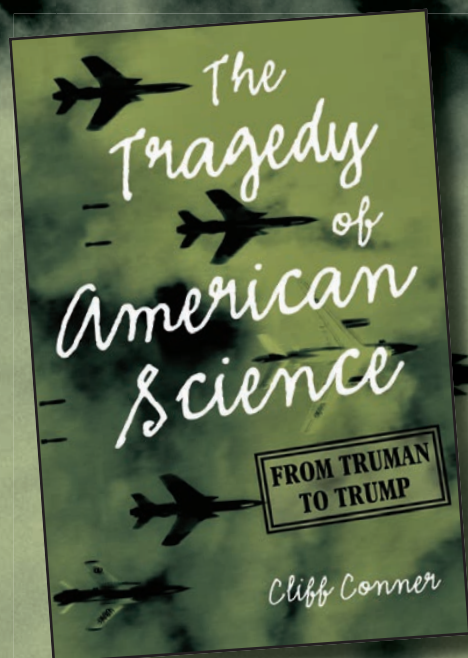
The common wisdom has long been that people kind of accepted the budget cuts, that there was no choice so they had to deal with it. But I found in my research that wasn't actually the case.

For example, there were large, sustained protests that saved Hostos Community Col-

lege from being axed, which would have been a huge blow to the Puerto Rican community it served.

This too is a moment when that kind of popular mobilization is again needed. There's no question that the Black Lives Matter movement is responsible for focusing much more energy and attention on the city budget than usual, and even though the billion-dollar cut to the NYPD has not turned out to be what we were told, the fact that people are even talking about it is very important and shows how crucial popular mobilization is if we hope to change the situation going forward. Waiting for Washington to act is a non-solution. We need instead to put popular pressure on the ground here in New York State and to work together to call for the city to rise to the moment of this crisis.

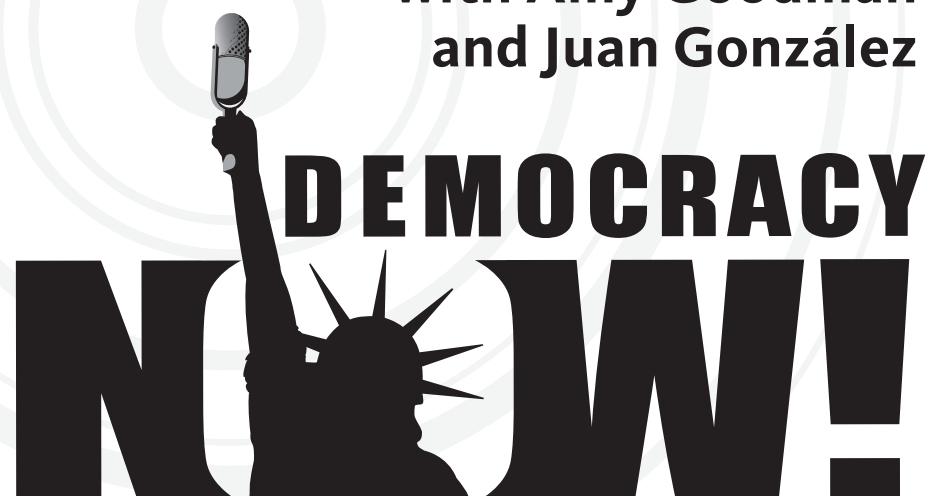
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# FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

## NEW YORK CITY TEACHERS AND PARENTS ARE QUESTIONING A RETURN TO SCHOOL. THEIR SAFETY CONCERNS ARE WELL-FOUNDED.

BY KATYA SCHWENK

Each night at dinner, Jake Jacobs sits down to the grave disparities in New York's public schools.

Jacobs is a middle school art teacher at Bronx Park Middle School where 93 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. His wife, however, teaches at a school in one of Westchester's most affluent school districts, giving classes to children from some of the nation's wealthiest neighborhoods. Both school districts plan to reopen in the fall. Yet the disparities in the resources they have to do so, Jacobs says, are like "night and day."

In the spring, he said, the Westchester district responded rapidly to the initial spread of the coronavirus, shuttering its schools on March 8. New York City did not close down its school system until a full week later. The city's delay came at a serious cost. At least 74 Department of Education employees have died of COVID-19, including a disproportionate number of teachers' aides; a disparity that is emblematic of the virus's harsher toll on communities of color.

Had schools closed earlier, teachers say, those deaths might have been avoided.

Remembering a disastrous spring, many teachers fear returning in the fall. Mayor Bill de Blasio has promised that schools will reopen using "blended learning," meaning that only a fraction of students will be in the building at any one time, so as to comply with social distancing mandates. Yet key details of the plan remain fuzzy. And even more troubling, some of the plan's more specific promises, like nightly deep cleaning for schools, are far-fetched, according to school administrators and staff who spoke with *The Independent*.

The fall is approaching, and resistance to reopening is growing among teachers. "If anyone asked us right now, could we open schools tomorrow safely, the answer is no. We can't right now," UFT president Michael Mulgrew told WNYC on July 18. "There are so many questions that haven't been answered." Schools that the UFT deemed unsafe, he promised, would not reopen in the fall.

Teachers that spoke with *The Independent* described similar resistance within their own communities. Plans for sick-outs, which teachers threatened in the spring, are taking shape. Rallies and marches are being organized.

The city's most under-resourced schools, teachers say, will bear a disproportionate burden if reopening plans go awry. Jacobs has seen the funding gaps in New York's schools, ever-widening as wealthy PTAs flood money into already-wealthy school systems and the city slashes its education budget. "You ask me what the differences in our schools are?" he says.

"It's funding. It's services. It's everything."

• • •

THOUGH COVID-19 CASE NUMBERS HAVE STABILIZED IN RECENT WEEKS, New York City faces steep challenges in safely reopening its schools in September. It is contending not only with \$1 billion in cuts to the Department of Education over the last two years but also long-standing infrastructural issues: Many schools are overcrowded, have for years suffered chronic shortages of soap and other cleaning supplies, and are badly understaffed.

These problems are more prevalent for the city's most vulner-

able students. Overcrowding, for example, disproportionately affects immigrant students due to the underfunding of new school construction in their communities. All are compounding factors for a contagious respiratory virus.

The city is also strapped for cash. While schools around the country are getting federal aid from the CARES Act, New York City's schools have seen none of that money. In April, Gov. Andrew Cuomo sent \$716 million in stimulus money for schools to the city — and then immediately cut \$716 million in state funds from the city's education budget. Schools, in effect, received none of their designated aid, which could have helped the Department of Education withstand the additional \$400 million in cuts that came with de Blasio's July budget.

Since May, de Blasio has floated plans for a fall reopening. And, as spring turned to summer, pressure to bring students back to classrooms increased. President Trump has campaigned relentlessly for schools to reopen, even as school districts in new virus hotspots announce that they will stay virtual. Some educators, too, have warned that continuing with full remote learning will exacerbate educational disparities and hurt working parents.

On July 8, the city released its "return to school" plan, which outlined the precautions schools will take in order to reopen. The crux of the plan is its "cohort" model, in which a school body is divided into two or more rotating groups, who each go to school for part of the week, and have remote instruction the rest of the time.

Yet educators say the plan leaves questions unanswered. For weeks the DOE has failed to provide guidance on critical aspects of the plan, even as New York state has released more detailed requirements for school reopening. There is no plan yet for busing, for instance. Nor is it even clear whether Gov. Cuomo will allow the city to go through with its reopening. He says he will make the final call the first week of August.

"You have the sense that no one is really in control," says Amanda Vender, an English-as-a-new-language (ENL) teacher in Elmhurst, Queens. "No one is exerting leadership that would give us confidence."

A particular concern for many parents and teachers is the question of cleaning. The DOE promises to ship additional supplies to schools — disinfectant wipes and hand sanitizer, for example — and promises additional deep cleaning, day and night, with new electrostatic sprayers.

Teachers say they have doubts about these goals. So do custodians. Robert J. Troeller, president of Local 891, the union that represents the city's custodian engineers, says custodial teams do not have adequate staffing or supplies for the increases in cleaning that the DOE is promising. Given the city-wide hiring freeze, it's likely to stay that way.

"We want it to happen," he tells *The Indy*. "But we need the resources. The budgets that they gave us are inadequate to provide the level of service that they're promising."

Troeller estimates that the DOE is asking for a 25 percent increase in labor, without hiring any new staff. And, because of the hiring freeze, there will be no way to replace staff who retire or fall ill — stretching custodial workers even thinner across the city as they risk their lives to keep schools safe.

A DOE spokesperson told *The Indy* that the city would release more specific cleaning protocols in the coming weeks, and that custodians would be "well-equipped with guidance and supplies" when buildings reopened.

While the city says it is providing additional cleaning equipment



to help with the custodian shortage, Troeller says that still isn't enough. The nightly cleaning of all surfaces that the DOE promises is "not something we ever did before," he says. Without more staff, "I don't see how that's going to happen."

"If you want to bring people back, and you create a plan to keep them as safe as possible, but you don't provide us with the necessary funds to implement that plan, then it's just words on paper," Troeller says.

Even before the coronavirus, many New York City schools had struggled to keep up basic hygiene standards. Mindy Rosier-Rayburn, a special ed science teacher, says her school building in Harlem, which houses four separate schools, had routinely been left without paper towels, soap and toilet paper.

"We had teachers that would bring in their own soap," she says. "And we're trusting [the DOE] to keep everything clean?"

Troeller says custodial teams have begun receiving additional supplies from the DOE, as promised. But some school administrators have doubts about whether the city can provide the masks and hand sanitizer that it says will be delivered to schools on an "as needed basis" after an initial shipment.

Two school administrators described to *The Indy* significant delays in the deliveries of such supplies to public schools in late May, which they were instructed to disperse to communities. In one case, the supplies did not arrive for over a week, with no explanation or notice, the administrator said.

Even if schools are clean, reopening still involves serious risks of exposure. Aixa Rodriguez, a high school ENL teacher and the founder of the advocacy group Bronx Educators United for Justice, says parents are more preoccupied with transport.

"It's not so much the inside the classroom that parents have been asking me about," she says. "It's the transportation. They're afraid. Maybe the classroom will have sprays and hand sanitizer, but it's an hour commute for some of our kids."

Rodriguez was adamant, though, that her school would be unsafe for students and teachers. "Let's get it straight: I want to see my kids," she says. But, she insists, she's scared that her building is simply inadequate; all its classrooms are internal. "We cannot open windows. We cannot get fresh air," she said.

The DOE says it is in the process of making repairs to the city's many aging ventilation systems, but it's unclear if the buildings will have proper air circulation by September.

Also concerning, administrators and educators said, is the continued absence of any guidance from the DOE for handling coronavirus outbreaks. In the early days of the pandemic, the DOE required any child who developed symptoms at school to quarantine from the general student body until they could be picked up. At some understaffed schools, one school administrator told *The Indy*, principals or assistant principals were forced to isolate themselves with sick children, in absence of other protocol.

The DOE says all schools will have a designated "isolation room" for children who fall ill during the school day. Yet it has no plans yet for contact tracing or other safety measures in the event of a coronavirus case in school communities. A spokesperson told *The Indy* those plans will be released closer to September.

Many schools already struggle to provide adequate medical attention to students. The New York City school system has a severe shortage of nurses. Hundreds of schools have no school nurse at all or rely on temporary contract nurses who don't have access to students' health records.

"What happens when a child or a teacher or a staff member becomes ill? How are they isolated? And who are they isolated with? These are basic questions," Kaliris Salas-Ramirez, an East Harlem parent and member of the District 4 Community Education Council, which advises the DOE, tells *The Indy*.

She says the DOE has yet to provide satisfying answers.

This is all further complicated by overcrowding, which is endemic to New York City's schools. Many buildings, like Rosier-Rayburn's, contain multiple schools and share bathrooms between them. More than half of New York City's 1,800 public schools are

considered crowded by the DOE. Last fall, over 300,000 students were in classes with more than 30 students. Some particularly overcrowded buildings require students to take classes in trailers parked outside.

Leonie Haimson, the founder and executive director of the non-profit organization Class Size Matters, has been fighting against school overcrowding in New York for years. The pandemic, she says, is putting a new spotlight on old problems: "If the city had put any effort and money into lowering class size and building more schools over the last decade or so, we'd be in a better position right now than we are."

The DOE has been devising elaborate schedules that allow students in overcrowded schools to return to classrooms. In June, the city sent out a survey to principals, asking them to estimate their schools' capacity for students, given loose social-distancing parameters. "Since when are teachers and principals architects and physicians?" says Salas-Ramirez.

As it stands, the more overcrowded a school, the fewer days a week students can be in class. De Blasio has said that most students will go to school two or three days a week, and learn virtually otherwise. This, though, only includes schools that can accommodate half of their students at one time. Students at schools with a lower capacity will only attend school as infrequently as once a week. Several school administrators that spoke with *The Indy* warned that many schools would struggle even to follow that more limited schedule.

"There are many teachers that feel that it's not even worth the risk, because they're not going to be able to see their students enough over the course of the week," Haimson says.

Particularly in high schools, students' schedules are already complex. They need particular classes and credits to graduate, and to receive instruction from teachers with particular licenses. Some students will opt for all-remote learning, which the DOE is offering as an option. School administrators are scrambling to come up with schedules that account for it all, with little guidance from overhead.

Teachers, meanwhile, are deciding whether to return to the classroom at all. Jake Jacobs says he and many of his fellow teachers in the Bronx are weighing whether to apply for a medical exemption, which would allow

them to teach remotely in the fall, if approved.

"Nobody knows what to do. We have our backs against the wall right now," Jacobs says. Teachers living with vulnerable family members, for instance, are ineligible for an exemption if they are themselves healthy. They say they are being forced to put their loved ones at risk.

Jacobs himself worries that if he got the exemption, it would be as if he were abandoning his students and colleagues.

"I'm feeling like I'd be letting my staff down," he explains. "Because if my staff's going in, and they're risking their health, and I'm staying at home nice and safe — they're going to look at me like I'm a coward."

Amanda Vender says teachers at her Elmhurst school are keeping close tabs on the DOE's plans. They will consider organized action in the fall, she says, if they feel that reopening will be unsafe.

"There will be a lot of resistance if teachers feel concerned for

*Continued on next page*



FACEBOOK

# BOUNDLESS KNOWLEDGE

## WHY I'LL BE TEACHING OUTSIDE THIS FALL

BY KRISTIN LAWLER

For weeks, I've been telling colleagues, administrators, anyone who would listen, really, that I plan to teach all my fall classes outside on the grounds of my beautiful riverside Bronx campus. The response has generally been a mildly dismissive chuckle. But I am dead serious.

What we know about COVID-19 is tentative but, so far, it seems that there are three things that will allow us to live in public and still keep each other safe: staying outside, wearing a mask and social distancing. My small Catholic college plans to hold in-person classes though. Unlike top tier elite private institutions or public universities like CUNY, we can probably not weather a fully online academic year without losing a catastrophic number of students. Besides, real education flows through embodied interactions, and there is simply no substitute for that. This is especially true for our working-class, largely first-generation student population.

Of course, there is a plan to make the indoor air safe: filtration, masks, distance. But this virus has proven again and again that it does not abide by the tenets of wishful thinking and there is just no evidence that indoor air won't transmit it over the course of a class session or a day of teaching.

So why not head outside? The weather's fine. Even when

it's not, tents overhead, heat lamps, hell, coats and hats will work. I can't help bragging here: I teach at one of the most beautiful spots in all of New York City. Seventy rolling acres, all the buildings historic landmarks, Hudson River and Palisades views, lots of gorgeous patios. I can take my pick of idyllic spots on campus, and I know this is not the case at every college, especially in big cities.

So I recommend that we take a cue from what restaurants are doing:

take the streets. Claim space for what matters — in New York, eating out is a basic part of city life. So space is given over to it. And just as the city looks extraordinarily beautiful these days, in a dreamy European café society kind of way, I think outdoor college classes could add something even more magical. Every park should be buzzing with the intellectual life of the city. Streets around campuses should be closed and open-air tents set up for masked professors and students.

I am working hard to figure out how to do this well, until the inevitable winter hibernation (and we finish up via Zoom). In addition to getting something to amplify my voice, I am considering what kind of outdoor setup will best engage students. It's actually a wonderful exercise: I have not thought about the spatial arrangement of my classes for a long time and it's a welcome shake-up, a breath of fresh air.

I teach sociology and one of its subjects is the way that space conditions social relations. The chance to think concretely about this in my own classes and engineer sessions around new spatial flows is invigorating.

I hope my colleagues follow suit. Most are not part of Trump's death cult, so I have a feeling they will. And I am well aware that this is quite easy in the context of higher education, far easier than for elementary or even for sec-

ondary schools. Still, teachers are extraordinary. I have complete faith in them to take student learning down to the studs and innovate together, in their unions and professional associations, what and how students can learn when taken outside.

The idea that learning can only happen under rigid curricular standardization, in standard-issue, rigid spaces, is false. Let the teachers decide how to foster student learning in a new context. I trust them — us — completely. Even the lamest, most burned-out teacher is a thousand times smarter, more capable and better intentioned than Betsy freaking DeVos.

It's our elites who can't be trusted. Trump has made it all too clear that he does not give a shit whether any of us live or die. The administration seems to favor viral spread. Wall Street doesn't give a shit either. The slow-motion disaster we are living through is a consequence of a decades-in-the-making evisceration of all things public and of the common good.

It's long past time for us to rescind decision-making privileges from the American ruling class. They are driving us off a cliff. But we are smart. Together, in public discussion and autonomous, creative action, we can bring to birth a new world, as the old union song promises, "from the ashes of the old." See you outside.

*Kristin Lawler is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in New York City.*

## SCHOOL RETURN

*Continued from previous page*

their safety and the safety of their students," she tells *The Indy*.

That resistance has already begun. Vender is a member of the Movement of Radical Educators (MORE), the social justice, left-wing caucus within the United Federation of Teachers, which represents the city's public school educators. The caucus has grown increasingly vocal about the dangers of re-opening schools in recent weeks, and plans to hold a march next week to the Department of Education headquarters to demand schools do not reopen.

A new hashtag has been circling online: #WeWontDieforDOE.

Switching to a remote fall "has always been a possibility," says Rosier-Rayburn, who sits on the UFT's roughly 90-member executive board. Though she did not give specifics on UFT's negotiations with the DOE, she says remote learning is "absolutely being discussed. It is absolutely on the table."

But it is hardly an ideal solution. Pediatricians and psychologists warn that children's learning and mental health are put at risk when instruction is fully virtual and parents will be left without consistent childcare, hot meals and the many other critical resources schools provide.

De Blasio has touted his plan for free childcare for 50,000 students per day in the fall, but that accounts for less than 10 percent of the city's 560,000 elementary school

students, many of whom will be out of school for most of the week. Working families say they are left with no good options.

"It's really difficult for parents to answer how they feel about September," says Joey, a mother whose two children go to school in the Bronx and who asked that *The Indy* only use her first name for this story. "It's very hard. We need to make a living. I want my kids to go to school, but I'm afraid."

Joey says her concerns and those of fellow parents are not being heard by the DOE. Many are like her, Chinese immigrants, and the language barrier, she says, is not addressed by their school or city government.

"They send people into these meetings and they don't offer to translate. Then they say there were no questions, no anything," she says. "Nobody knows our concerns."

Rodriguez, who leads Bronx Educators United for Justice, says teachers feel similarly. "I don't think we have been given a platform as teachers to say what we need," she says. "They are not listening to us."

Among parents, among teachers, among school staff, there has arisen a gradual sense that the city is steamrolling ahead toward the fall, leaving all else behind. As September approaches, families and educators say, they will need to take matters into their own hands.

"This is our life," says Rosier-Rayburn. "This is much bigger than things we've fought for in the past."



ZHENIT JINENZ

# WE ARE LIVING INSIDE RONALD REAGAN'S DYSTOPIA

BY DANNY KATCH

“**T**he nine most terrifying words in the English language are ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help.’”

Ronald Reagan made this joke at a 1986 press conference and it has since become a cherished chestnut in conservative circles. It’s kind of sad for Republicans that they find this weak one-liner witty and it’s fully tragic for society that they genuinely think it’s a statement of profound wisdom.

Today, we are in desperate need of the kind of help that only government can provide: unemployment relief, a national system of COVID testing and tracing, centralized public health information and laws that strip police of their limitless powers to brutalize protesters and people of color. Instead we’re confronted with the truly terrifying sight of a government that is only here to harm by sowing distrust, spreading disinformation and stymieing all attempts to implement measures to lower the COVID infection rate.

Four decades of free-market fundamentalism popularized by Reagan have had deadly impacts that were already accelerating. The years leading up to 2020 saw global temperatures steadily rising and U.S. life expectancy steadily falling. But now we are experiencing our greatest crisis under our smallest president.

The unstoppable force of the coronavirus has met the immovable indifference of Donald Trump and the Republicans, and has given frank new expression to just how pathologically anti-human the Reaganite ideology truly is: The elderly should sacrifice their lives for the economy and freedom means the right to spread infection by not wearing a mask.

Hundreds of thousands are dead or dying and tens of millions face economic ruin but Trump and his party refuse to steer us out of the path of the storm because they truly believe that the bigger threat comes from increasing government regulations and social welfare programs.

History is a very dark comedy whose jokes unfold slowly

and Trump’s spectacularly failed response to this pandemic is the actual punchline to Reagan’s attempt at making fun of big government. Too bad we all had to be there.

Speaking of history, when Reagan made his now-famous joke 34 years ago about the terror of government assistance, it was in the context of announcing increased aid for farmers suffering from drought and rising debts. The joke was part of Reagan’s explanation that this new round of subsidies was a transition measure on the path toward the “ultimate goal” of “economic independence in agriculture.”

Reagan was reassuring farmers that receiving government aid didn’t

make them like the Black “welfare queens” he invoked as degenerate symbols of liberal dependency. No, these were hardworking men who had hit a temporary obstacle on their path to rugged individualism.

In reality, it was Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), or “welfare,” that was used by most recipients as a short-term cushion until they found their next job, and farmers who were permanently dependent on government funding, which didn’t stop small farmers — white and Black — from continuing to go under while big agricultural firms gobbled up the subsidies.

Reagan was a master at hitting all the false notes of race and class in the classic American songbook. His “nine most terrifying words” joke flattered the egos of his white country club base (and many more who yearned to join them), who took massive tax breaks and subsidies to be their God-given right while sneering at poor Black people for taking far smaller government “handouts.”

But wait — there’s more. Shortly after announcing the new agricultural aid, Reagan urged the Senate to restore aid to the Contra guerilla army — the same Contras who had been introducing crack-cocaine into Black neighborhoods in South Central LA while working on the CIA’s payroll to overthrow Nicaragua’s socialist government.

For succeeding generations of his followers, Reagan’s lighthearted quip would curdle into a paranoid dogma that saw dark conspiracy theories in the most mundane federal attempts to regulate guns or expand healthcare access. Meanwhile, in the same speech, Reagan lobbied Congress for the brutal paramilitaries who were a part of a secret government program that is perhaps the most outrageous real-life conspiracy in recent American history.

See, it’s a joke that works on so many levels.

Ten years after Reagan’s speech, Bill Clinton disastrously killed AFDC, a historic victory for the long right-wing campaign against government “entitlements.” But rich people’s sense of entitlement would only grow more powerful and self-delusional until, at some point, much of the U.S. ruling

class seems to have completely detached itself from the recognition that it depends on a functioning government, which is, of course, how we ended up with the Trump presidency.

Like George W. Bush before him, Trump rose by projecting an image of strength through impunity. His power to get away with being supremely ignorant and incompetent inspired followers and rattled opponents. But in the face of challenges that can’t be bluffed away from the table, the White House has been reduced to throwing a catastrophic temper tantrum:

They want schools to open back up and they’re not going to let stupid science stand in the way! They want the economy back the way it was before COVID so people need to get back to work! And no, they don’t want to hear the facts about rising infection rates or the logic that this is wasting all the economic sacrifices people made during the spring!

And yet even now, Trump is not as much of an outlier from his class as he seems. Business leaders are losing faith in Trump’s ability to govern without lighting himself on fire, but they too have been pushing for schools and the economy to reopen. Many are betting on Joe Biden to put a more human face on their inhuman agenda and there’s decades of evidence to support that wager.

As bad as things are, this is also a time of inspiring hope that we are finally on the verge of escaping the nightmare of Reagan’s joke (or is it the joke of Trump’s nightmare?).

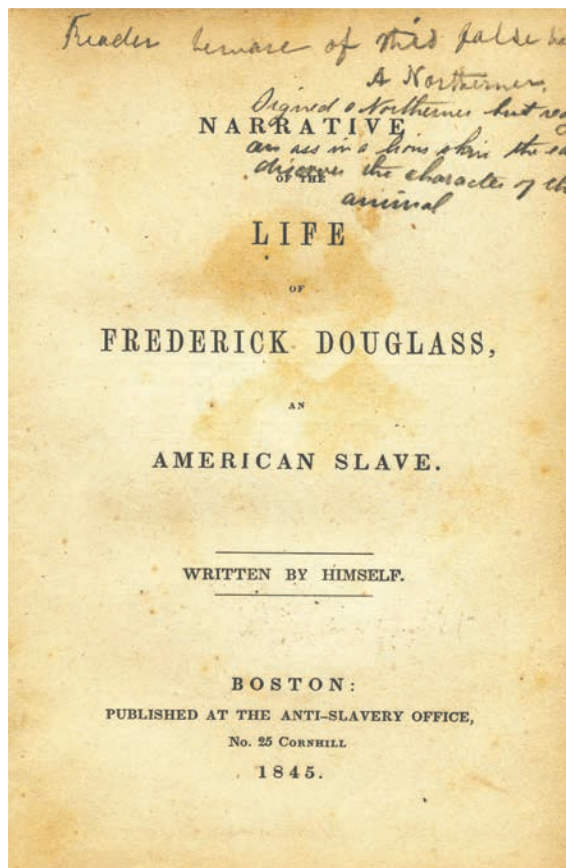
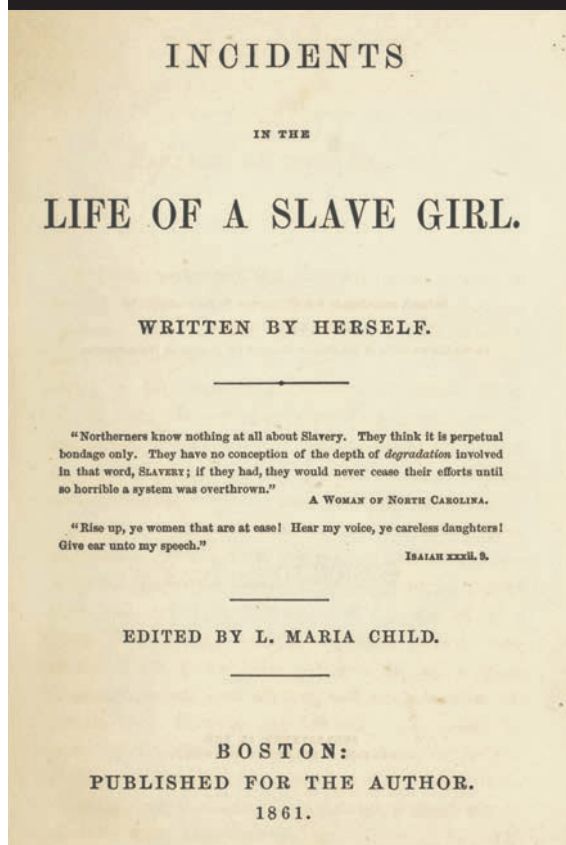
In recent years, issue polling and Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaigns have revealed a sea change away from the 40-year bipartisan worship of the individual and the market. Polling during the pandemic has shown a continuation of this trend, as strong majorities want the government to prioritize protecting lives over protecting the economy. If that seems like simple common sense, congratulations, you’re a socialist.

But what has made this a moment of rare power and opportunity is the historic Black-led uprising in response to the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the sudden drop in support for police and widespread approval of confrontational Black protests, both of which are as unusual in American history as the recent popularity of socialism.

The rebellion has rapidly undercut support for the dark underside of Reaganism’s vision of freedom, a corporate-libertarian ideology that started in Jim Crow Virginia as a reaction to the “tyranny” of federal desegregation efforts — one of the few moments in U.S. history that the government tried to create for Black people the same freedom of movement that it champions for capital.

If the growing U.S. left can find a way to strengthen and fuse these two developments, we have the potential to redefine freedom for generations to come. In recent years, the movement has produced a beautiful slogan, the nine most inspirational words I can think of for all of us trapped in Reagan’s America:

“When Black people get free, we all get free.”



# BLACK LITERATURE HOLDS UP A MIRROR TO AMERICA

BY NICHOLAS POWERS

Black literature saved my life. It made the deadly or just weird power dynamics around me instantly readable. I could see myself and my world clearly. Turn the pages of, say, Frederick Douglass's autobiographies or Percival Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure* and you'll find a mirror. Black writers more accurately reflect our reality, in part because they are less burdened by loyalty to our patriotic myths.

So instead of assuming America is the "City on a Hill," you can see it as open-air prison in Harriet Jacobs' 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Against the trope that America is the "Land of the Free," you can read how it faces apocalypses in James Baldwin's 1963 *The Fire Next Time*.

Black literature reflects the shadow of the American Dream. And then it holds a mirror to the mirror. The infinite space that appears is the reality of the human spirit.

In light of that tradition, let me introduce you to parts of my syllabus. Over the years of teaching, I found that some books on their own or in odd pairs really spoke to my students. You'll find here authors who never met holding hands and new ways of understanding familiar names.

Our first pairing is 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass and 50 Cent's 2005 *From Pieces to Weight*. The first is a foundational classic of the African-American canon. The second is decidedly not. Read them back to back. See the same obsession with freedom. See the backdrop leap from Southern antebellum plantation to New York Queens in the midst of the Crack Era. See emancipation redefined from a communal act to an individual one. See the projects remake the violence and confinement of the plantation but now drug dealers are the chemical overseers, doing the work of snuffing out Black consciousness. See gold chains replace slave chains.

Next read Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*. See the granular details of domestic life that possess the scar tissue of slavery. Told and inhabited mostly by women characters, the novel redirects history to the feminine inheritance and the transformation of trauma into the sublime. Leaving behind social realism and autobiography, Morrison filled in

the silences of the original slave narratives with magic realism and let its sorcery lift the truth to the surface.

Next read Ann Petry's 1946 novel *The Street*. Meet Lutie. She's a single, Black, working-class mother. And she believes in the American Dream. Clawing her way, paycheck by paycheck, to a middle-class life for her son Bub, she is tripped up by men

who want to harm her. It is a masterful novel that has yet to get the credit it deserves. Long before the term "intersectionality," Petry shined a light on the crisscrossing of racism, sexism, and classism into a barbed-wire knot that choked Lutie's dream. See again the Structuralist analysis implicit in the plot. Her panicked launch out of the Harlem ghetto shows, in the moment she almost escapes, a brief glimpse of the panorama of American life.

Next read *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and Image of the Damaged Black Psyche 1880 to 1996* by Daryl Michael Scott. He describes the use of "damage imagery," the image of Black people damaged psychologically by racism, and how it was used by Black radicals to argue for nationalism, liberals for reform and conservatives for racial quarantine of the "inferior races." The imagery was politically useful but was also a warped reflection of the complex reality of Black life. The stereotype of broken Black people remains

## YOU'LL FIND HERE AUTHORS WHO NEVER MET HOLDING HANDS.

to this day a bottomless mine that politicians and artists tap for easy-to-consume characters. Reagan vilified the "welfare queen," and Malcolm X exhorted the "lost Black man."

Our next pairing is the 1996 novel *Push* by Sapphire and the 2001 satire *Erasure* by Percival Everett. In *Push*, meet Precious Jones a kind of Frankenstein character stitched into a whole by the author from the stories of traumatized youth she encountered while working as a social worker. Imagine Celie from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* born in 1980s Crack Era Harlem. Celie and Precious have been raped, molested and abused for being dark skinned. Add to that Precious is obese and is HIV positive. Both find liberation in literacy. Damage imagery hits Middle Passage level in this novel.

Five years later, Everett published *Erasure* that satirizes *Push*. In it we meet Monk, a middle-class Black writer who finds no audience for his Postmodernist books and decides to write a fake ghetto novel. It sells mountains of copies,



## REMEMBERING OCTAVIA BUTLER

"I was able to do anything and there were no walls to hem you in and there was no human condition that you were stopped from examining," the great Black science fiction writer Octavia Butler said of her chosen craft in a January 2006 interview with *The Indy's* Kazembe Balagun. It was Butler's last published interview before she died unexpectedly the following month at the age of 58. For more of her thoughts about the joy of writing, writing to save the world and inventing whole new worlds through the medium of science fiction, see [bit.ly/3h09GKs](http://bit.ly/3h09GKs).

— INDYPENDENT STAFF

making him wealthy. Readers don't realize it's a joke but think he's a real "voice from the streets." The satire hits hard as one realizes the hidden appetite for Black suffering that drives too much of liberal culture.

The next pairing is Piri Thomas' 1967 classic *Down These Mean Streets* and Junot Díaz 2007 magnum opus *A Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Both Thomas and Díaz crafted New York/New Jersey/Long Island-based coming-of-age stories, the former an autobiography, the latter a novel that maps the fluid landscape of Blackness. They both bridge the Pan-Latino and Pan-African Diasporas. Both show protagonists struggling under the mask of masculinity. And both challenge the current fashionable idea of racial essentialism by following characters who are Black and Latinx and pick up the flotsam of cultural debris to beat and solder a new identity in a vortex of poverty and violence.

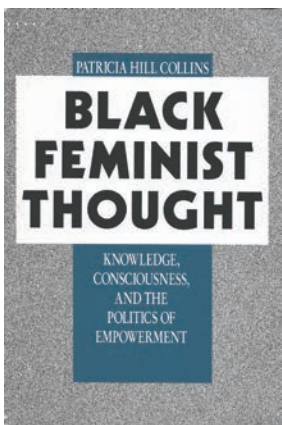
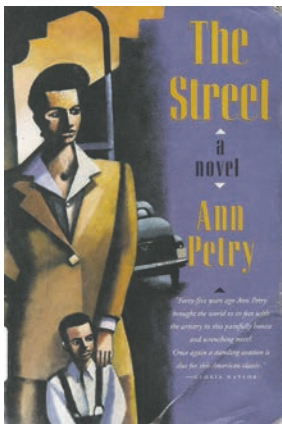
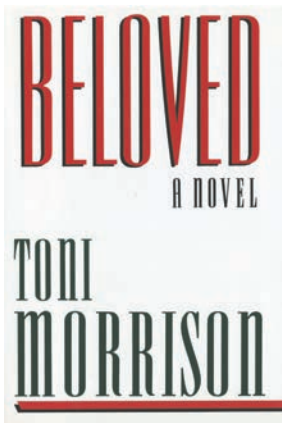
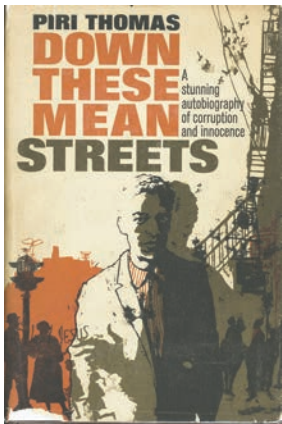
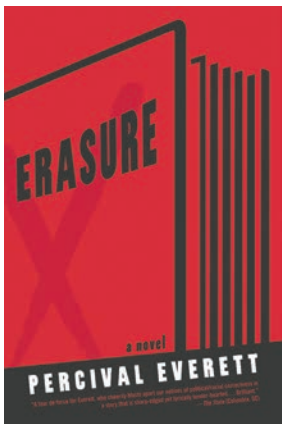
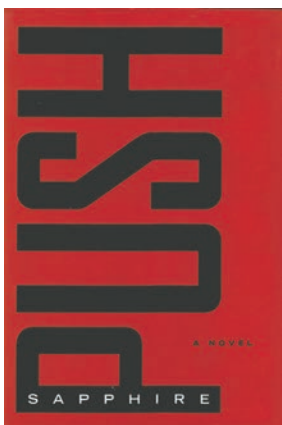
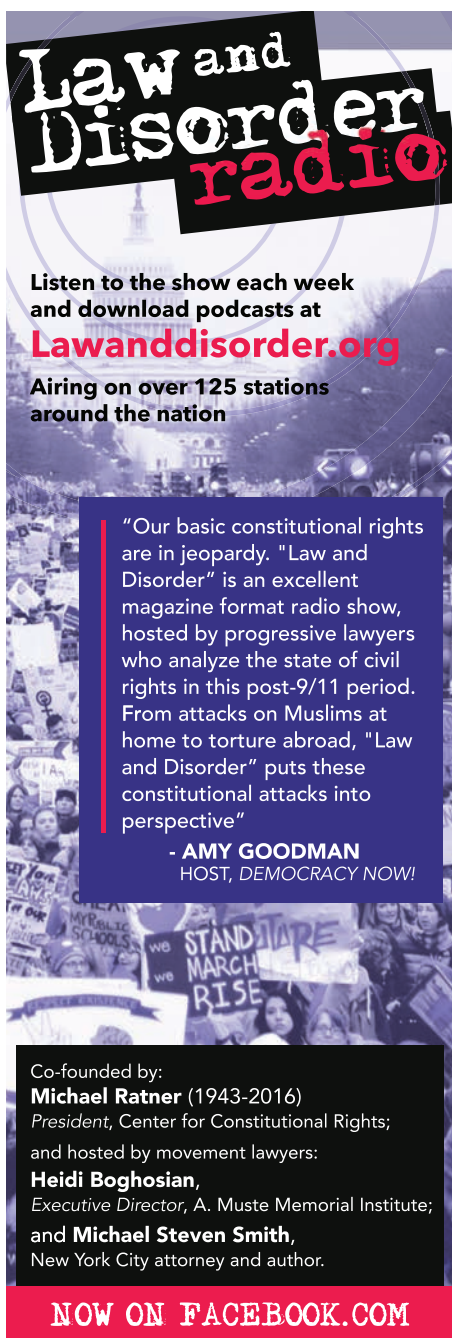
Our next pair is conservative writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali's 2006 autobiography *Infidel* and Jamaica Kincaid's 1997 memoir *My Brother*. The shared center of gravity is male supremacy. In *Infidel*, Ali comes to maturity in a family on the move from Somalia to Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia to Kenya. She chafes against the patriarchy and religious fundamentalism of her clan. She has her genitals mutilated as part of a tribal tradition. She is married off to a stranger. And she escapes. Scarred but tenacious, Ali embraces the liberalism of the Netherlands.

In her autobiography, Ali, an African woman, is the victim of patriarchy. In Kincaid's *My Brother*, the victim is her gay brother Devon. He hides his homosexuality by chasing after women, even as he secretly goes to a gay meeting house on the island of Antigua. When he contracts HIV, which blows up to AIDS, he dies with his secret. Only later does Kincaid realize who her brother truly was and eulogizes his passing with the book. Read these books back to back and Blackness becomes a dynamic geography that has at its center the shibboleth of patriarchy that these women bear witness to by reading the scars it left on their lives like fingertips on braille.

I'll close by recommending these five books. Read *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* by Adrienne Maree Brown, *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *Confessions of a Video Vixen* by Karrine Steffans, and *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity* by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. Yeah I know. I just went full professor, just gave you a semester's worth of books, but bear with me.

Of course five books are a lot but they are a beginner's guide to how women of color have safeguarded their bodies from patriarchy, survived violence and exploited blind spots in a capitalism that trades on youth and beauty. You will read about sex traffickers imprisoning poor village girls in the brothels of the Global South. You will walk the halls of Hollywood and rap video shoots where fame, money and power distort sexuality into a farce. You will hear how women healed themselves with sensual joy.

*Nicholas Powers is the author of The Ground Below Zero: 9/11 to Burning Man, New Orleans to Darfur, Haiti to Occupy Wall Street.*

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# GRIFTERS, BOMBERS, DESPOTS OR ... SWAMP RATS?

BY INDYPENDENT STAFF

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LEIA-LEE DORAN

After promoting genocide and settler colonialism for 87 years, the Washington NFL franchise previously known as the Redskins is mulling what to call itself next. Sports franchises often choose names that celebrate something widely associated with their hometown or regions be it an industry — Pittsburgh Steelers, Detroit Pistons, Milwaukee Brewers — or iconic historical moment or figure — Philadelphia 76ers, Dallas Cowboys, San Diego Padres — or something drawn from the natural world — Miami Dolphins, Colorado Rockies, New Orleans Pelicans.

With that in mind, here are four new team logos we designed to help the Washington football team celebrate our nation's capital in style. Which one would you choose?

**Ready to blitz and bomb your way to victory? Meet Petey the Patriotic Predator Drone! He's here to bring a big heaping helping of fiery Freedom™ to the end zone, whether you like it or not.**



**They're in it together! These best buddies are adept at catching kickbacks, passing the buck and bending over backwards for Big Business.**

**Native to everywhere, this valiant little vermin is happiest when he's frolicking in the most mucky marsh of our nation's capital with his many, many, many friends.**



**A tremendous mascot. Believe me. Many are even saying that this is the greatest mascot they've seen, ever. You know it. I know it. Everyone knows it. Except the failing New York Times.**



## MOVEMENT NARRATIVES

# SURVIVING TOGETHER

*Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*

EDITED BY MARINA SITRIN & COLECTIVA SEMBRAR

PLUTO PRESS, 2020

By Renée Feltz

The global crisis of COVID-19 has lasted long enough for us to see books published on how we responded during its early days. If you take a break from doom-scrolling to read *Pandemic Solidarity* you'll learn how we launched the largest mobilization of mutual aid projects in history, through firsthand accounts from 18 countries and regions that offer "templates and maps for the future," as Rebecca Solnit writes in the forward.

A decade ago, Solnit wrote *A Paradise Built in Hell*, about similar projects that followed five disasters, including the earthquakes in San Francisco in 1906 and Mexico City in 1985, documenting how people collaborated at the local level without succumbing to fear or resorting to authoritarianism. She says she found "horizontal democratic means were what worked, over and over, in place after place."

This new contribution to disaster sociology is an edited volume of essays and interviews from the

together regardless of their differences," says member Kelly G., in an interview. "The kinds of relationships that have emerged out of that have been very important."

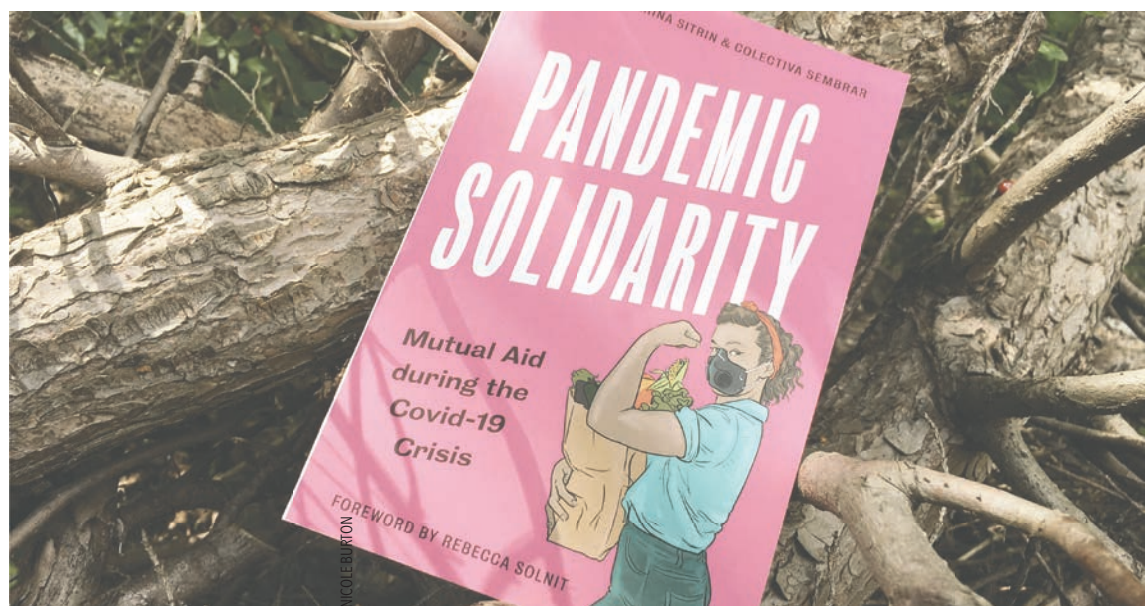
"Solidarity is a must. We don't have a choice," adds South African permaculturist Chuma Mgcayi. "No one

knows actually what will happen tomorrow and who will need whom."

Many contributors note the foundations for mutual aid networks that already existed in their communities and cultures, like the Nguni Bantu concept of ubuntu in Southern Africa, often translated as "I am because we are." Organizers in Lisboa, Portugal, describe a community-based solidarity initiative they launched called the DialogAR Network, which brings together four collectives to offer mental health services like "solidarity listening" and legal help, focusing on immigrants and low-wage workers during the pandemic.

"Even ordinary disasters never really end," Solnit has observed. Members of Colectiva Sembrar note: "This is a story without end."

The Common Ground Collective's work in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 shows the long term impact a project started in response to a disaster can have. In his 2011 book, *Black*



Middle East, South and East Asia, Southern Africa, Europe, "Turtle Island" and South America. The collection was compiled "based in part on who knew someone who might want to do this, and could, in such a short amount of time," writes editor Marina Sitrin. "Decisions were never based on where there were known solidarity groups and networks, as I assumed they were everywhere. And they are."

Sitrin is perhaps the perfect person to edit this project, given her background as an international activist and academic who previously wrote about horizontal organizing in Argentina and Greece. She collaborates with Colectiva Sembrar, a collective "dedicated to facilitating voices of those less heard who are... creating a new society in their actions."

In addition to contributions from people engaged in immediate responses like food distribution that rely on long-established networks, the essays include key insights from disability activists in South Korea who call for support that promises "more than mere survival. We also hear from members of emerging civil society networks in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa, like the C19 People's Coalition, started in March 2020 with about 300 organizations.

"[T]here is something about the time of the crisis and the possibility that the coalition has afforded to have people sit down and actually work

*Flags and Windmills*, Scott Crow describes how he joined with former Black Panther Malik Rahim to fill the void left by FEMA and bring volunteers together to gut houses, distribute food and keep racist vigilantes and police at bay. Afterward, they went on to provide resources like a free health clinic that continues to offer care today.

Crow recalls a moment at Rahim's kitchen table back in 2005, "when I was joking with Malik about how we were already doing things [that] hadn't been done in [a] long time. It was weird to know it at that time. Then over the months it started to grow, despite all the challenges."

Only the state can mobilize the trillions of dollars in public spending needed to lift us out of an economic depression. But whether or not we will see that kind of enlightened governance starting in 2021 will be an epic battle that depends in part on the outcome of a presidential election that is as uncertain as the length of this pandemic.

Amid the vagaries of politics, we can keep shared human needs in the foreground by scaling up mutual aid projects like those described in *Pandemic Solidarity*.

# REKINDLING THE 'ROMANCE OF AMERICAN COMMUNISM'

*The Romance of American Communism*

BY VIVIAN GORNICK

VERSO, 2020

By Steven Wishnia

If those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it, Vivian Gornick's recently reissued *The Romance of American Communism* is a crucial book for today's radical movements.

In this oral history originally published in 1977, Gornick, a red-diaper baby from the Bronx and prominent second-wave feminist, wrestles with the complex legacy of the U.S. Communist Party, its major contributions to the labor and civil rights movements of the mid-20th century and its destructively authoritarian internal politics. It mostly consists of pseudonymous interviews with more than 40 mostly former party members, a spectrum of working-class Bronx Jews, Western migrant workers, artists and actors, and middle-class youths with a burning spiritual hunger.

Its main theme is the all-consuming rush of becoming part of a movement bigger than yourself and finding a purpose. The party offered an ideology to explain the poverty and injustice of the Great Depression, and an organization dedicated to upending it and creating a new world. In the introduction, Gornick writes that she's now embarrassed by the purple romance-novel prose she used to describe her subjects, but the concept of "romance" fits their passion.

To the CP's credit, the far-right canard that the labor and civil rights movements were heavily red-tinged contains a good bit of truth. Some of the hardest-core union organizers of the 1930s were Communists, organizing transit, textile and port workers by industry instead of limiting themselves to skilled craftsmen. They organized strikes by thousands of California farmworkers in the early 1930s, a time when one national craft-union official Gornick quotes said "only fanatics are willing to live in shacks and get their heads broken in the interests of migratory labor."

Meanwhile, Bayard Rustin, philosophical mentor and logistics specialist for the civil rights movement, was a party member in the early 1940s. Lester Rodney of the *Daily Worker* was the first white sportswriter to campaign for the integration of major-league baseball, and the second black person elected to the New York City Council was Harlem Communist Benjamin Davis. The New York neighborhoods where hundreds of people turned out to resist evictions during the Depression were those with the strongest Communist presence, and current and former party members later co-founded some of the city's main tenant organizations.

Those seeds sprouted outside the party too. Harry Hay, who founded the Mattachine Society in 1950, the first major gay-rights organization in the United States, was a member, although he was expelled for being gay a few years later.

Losing yourself in passionate devotion, however, can open you up to manipulation and abuse. The Leninist secretive/authoritarian model was probably essential for sustaining a revolutionary movement in Tsarist Russia, but its Stalinist offspring was a world-historical disaster for

governing the Soviet Union and the socialist cause. The U.S. Communist Party defended Stalin to the point of endorsing the 1939 Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact. (My grandfather, a Warsaw-born Jewish immigrant active in the garment workers union, was one of the many party members who quit after that.)

The result was ruthless internal politics: Any disagreement with official dogma or minor screwup would be considered sabotage of the party's global mission, "objectively counterrevolutionary," and therefore the actions of an enemy. By the 1950s, members

stand the thought of ever going to another meeting!" Personal discontent was considered a reactionary self-indulgence. Many of Gornick's subjects, particularly the men, lucid and passionate when talking about politics, became tongue-tied when discussing their own feelings. Others say they hung on to the party like spouses in a bad marriage, still devoted to the underlying cause and reluctant to abandon the community that shaped their lives.

Gornick, largely apolitical after she left the CP milieu in 1956 at the age of 20 — part of the mass exodus after Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev revealed the depth of Stalin's police-state crimes — became a leading feminist writer in the early 1970s. Her impetus for this book, she says, came at a conference then, when she questioned the idea that

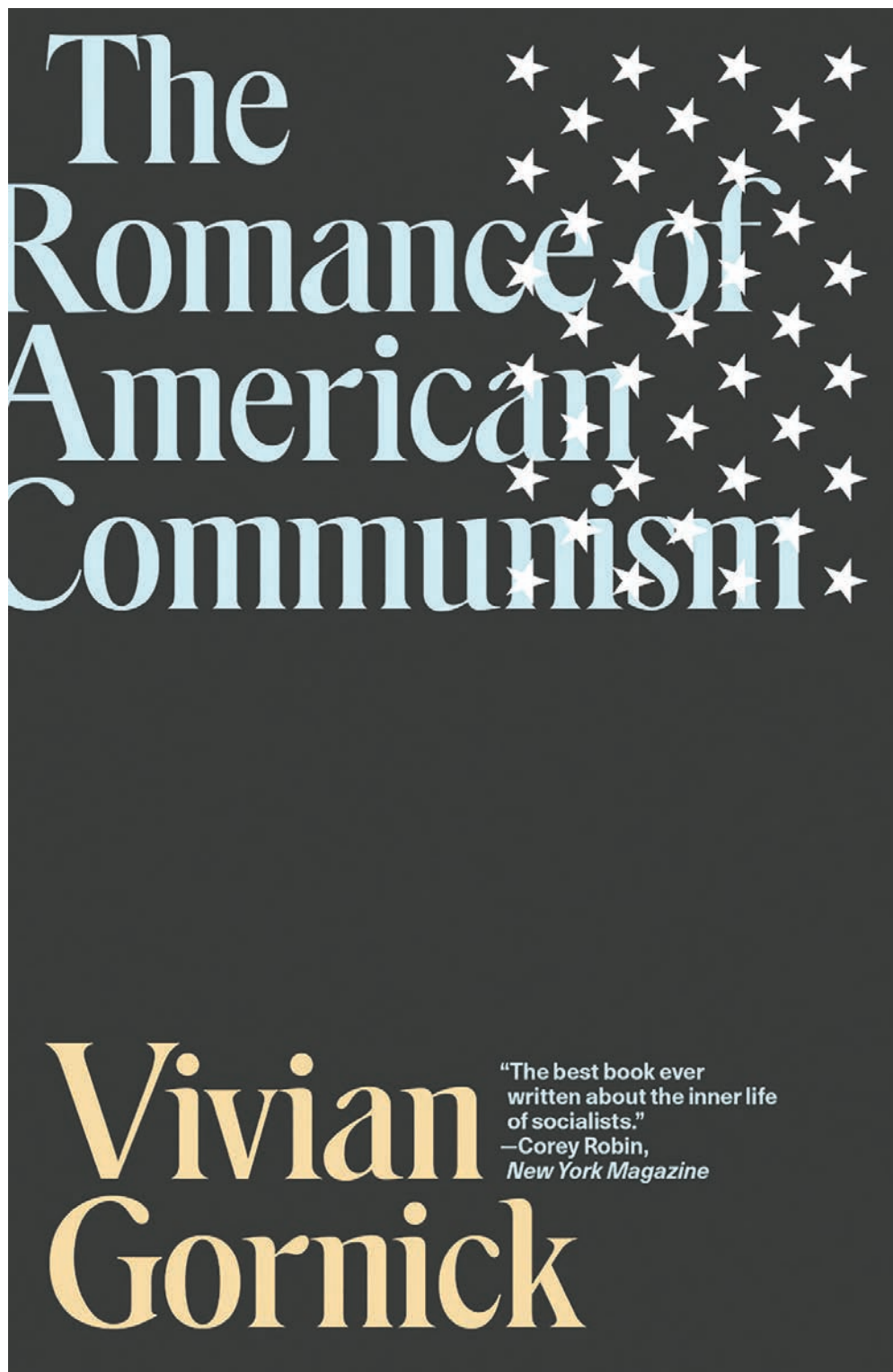
men are "by nature" oppressors, and was denounced as "an intellectual and a revisionist" — the type of viciously dismissive personal-political attack she loathed about the Stalinist style, coupled with the groupthink dogma that people are scared to question openly.

Neither of those traits have disappeared from today's activist subculture — one reason it's essential to learn from the mistakes of the past. If radical movements need leadership, structure, and discipline to be effective, the lesson of this book is to find a way to prevent that from devolving into dogma and tyranny.

However, Gornick ends *The Romance of American Communism* on an optimistic note, quoting "Eric Lanzetti" (leftist publisher Carl Marzani, a former Communist organizer on the Lower East Side who served 32 months in federal prison for not revealing his membership in the party while working for U.S. intelligence during World War II). Even those who left the party, he told her, were permanently politicized.

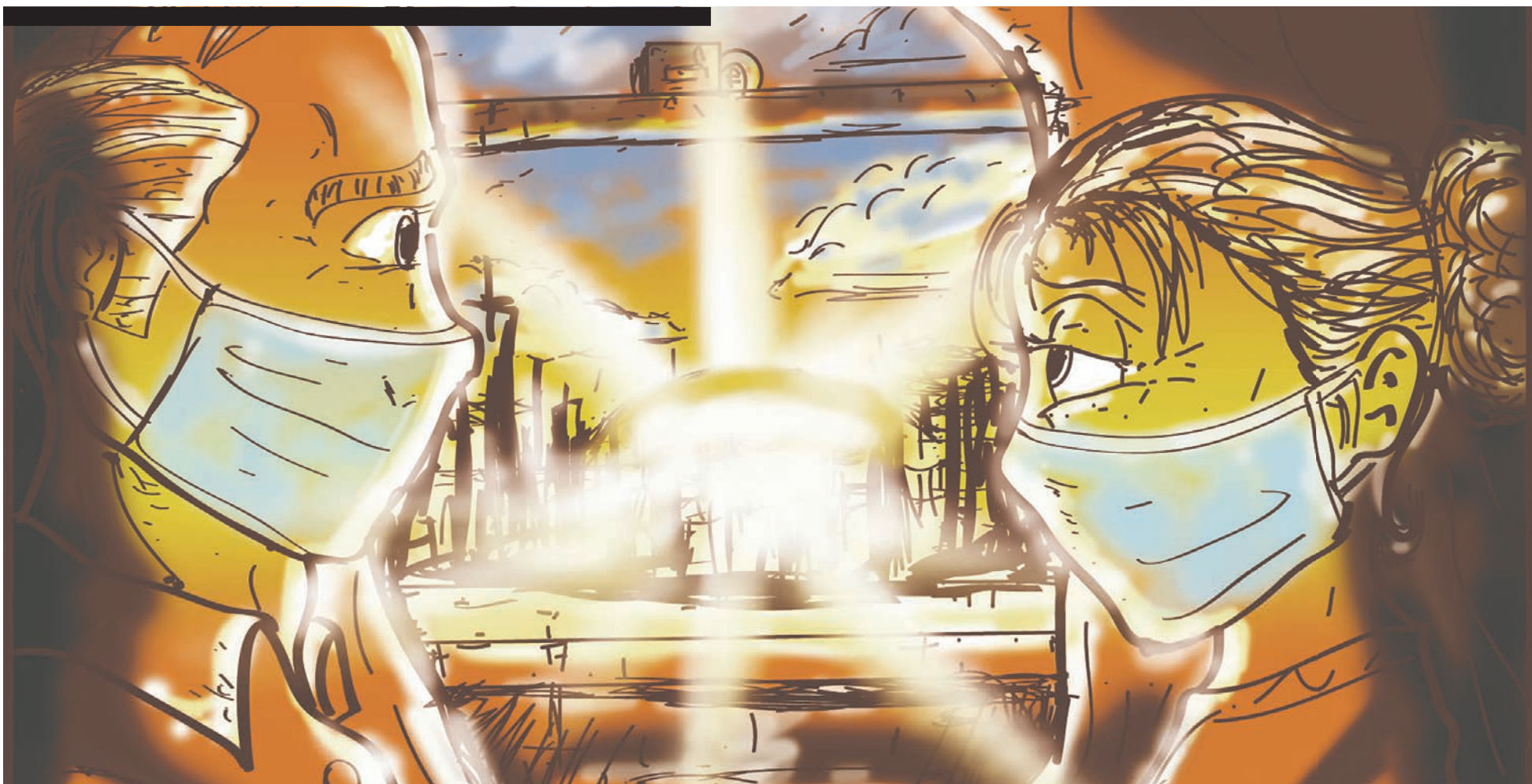
They'd learned to see "a system of oppression older than God" and feel part of a movement bigger than they ever knew existed, Marzani spied, and they were inevitably going to act on that understanding.

They were "impassioned by an ideal of social justice," Gornick writes. And for that, she does not regret depicting them as heroic 45 years ago.



were being expelled for offenses as trivial as visiting their sister in the South and serving watermelon at an outdoor party — both deemed evidence of "white chauvinism." That venomousness lingered on: Gornick notes that her most vitriolic (and anti-Communist) interviewee was far from the only one expressing "scorn and hatred for anyone who had left the party either thirty seconds earlier or thirty seconds later than he had. If they left earlier, they were cowards; if they left later, they were opportunists."

The party's organizing style also demanded people's entire lives. It got the work done but came at the sacrifice of any personal life outside activism. "Oy, those meetings!" laments "Selma Gardinsky." "You know why most Communists aren't politically active today? Because they can't



TYRONE WALLACE

# I'VE SURVIVED THE PANDEMIC. SO FAR. NOW WHAT?

BY KAREN MALPEDE

In April, when New York City was at the peak of COVID-19, when sirens were screaming in the streets and emergency rooms were overloaded with very ill people, when the elderly were dying first and fast, my husband and I jointly vowed not to go to the hospital, certainly not to be intubated.

If we fell ill, we would die consciously, with dignity. He is 87. I am 75. I did not wish to put younger doctors and nurses at risk caring for me and, firmly believing what we said, I tried hard to keep us well, as we never do know whether we can live up to the pledges we make to ourselves.

Now it is July and, a bit to my surprise, here we both are, alive. Doing what the living do.

In our case, that means making theater, even when the theaters are shuttered. It means marching with Black Lives Matter. When the protesters come streaming up our street, we throw on masks and join them, cheer them as they pass, shake our fists with theirs. The marchers are gloriously beautiful in that way of youth feeling what is still new to them — their righteous rage, their sorrow and their hope, truth, possibility.

Last night we had a lovely dinner with friends in their garden, our first time to anyone's home since the pandemic struck. Our friends, like us, have been being careful and remain virus-free — for now, one always hastens to add. Oddly, or perhaps not, the good food and lively political talk left me sad.

We've had many dinners in the same garden with 10, 12 or more friends. Last night we were only four. And the talk — about the disastrous Trump regime, the latest draconian pronouncements, the lies, assaults on science, on decency — leaves all of us infuriatingly sad. Have we said anything new, anything that has not been said by many?

Sometimes, I think there is no such thing as private life anymore. My daily reality, my COVID-inspired dreams, my worries about my child and her children (living in Texas, one of the new hot spots, and she an essential worker), my boredom, inability to sleep, endless tiredness, my grief, my rage, determination to eat less (I've just started trying to fast 16 hours a day), are so like everyone's.

Surely, we are all alone together in a maddeningly stultifying reality that keeps on getting worse with no end in sight. Is this, as a friend in Australia writes me on Facebook at 6 a.m., as bad as the Black Death? How many millions are yet to die?

Then, again, will the acceleration of climate change overtake the coronavirus in severity? Where do we go when the sea level rises? How do we evacuate while maintaining social distancing? What do we eat when drought destroys the crops?

"Will we live to see the end of this?" my husband and I and friends our age ask.

But, in truth, whatever age one is brings its own terrifying challenges: What will I do with my life? Will I ever have a job, a career, fall in love, have sex, marry, be produced or published, finish my degree, go on stage, have a child, do the work I long to do again? How? And for what?

At my age, I've at least done a great deal of what I wished — which does not mean I don't want more of every effort, every joy.

The same questions remain for everyone, whether we have only one or 81 remaining years, or the next five hours. How do I live a life of purpose? How do I make meaning? How do I become of use?

The mistake is thinking we can go back. We're in the middle of systems collapse and we might as well learn.

Open the schools, by all means, when it is safe enough to do so, but open them up outside, in nature — the forests, the parks, on the High Line. Let the young learn how things grow, how life struggles to renew itself; let them run and dance and tell stories, count stones, and build little huts. Hire young people supervised by teachers to run around with them. Teach survival skills, cooperation, regeneration.

Even in New York City enough open spaces might be found. Outside the cities, it's easy. It's safer and better educationally. There is plenty of theory to back this up. No more stigmatizing of "attention deficit" kids. Let them run and explore, find, describe, draw, and engage their particular abilities to focus intently. No more discipline

problems, let them wrestle in the mud. Let them learn cold and wet and hot, and the stories that go with the seasons. Let them grow food.

In every way, we should not go back, but "open up" in the true sense of that term — to the unknown that is before us, the difficult path of survival, the true path of care for Earth and her creatures, all of us.

I'm attempting to learn how to teach online at CUNY-John Jay College where I have nearly 100 students taking classes in theater and justice and in environmental justice. I'm thinking about what I have to teach now to the young. Age feels like an advantage.

I'll be teaching theater in extremity, from Euripides through James Baldwin to the present. And climate science, concepts of "othering," "sacrificial zones," regenerative ecology. I'll be asking students to understand and write about their own experiences in light of what I teach. I know from last semester that many are essential workers, a number have experienced COVID-19, and deaths. I know they need to tell and to be heard.

In my experience, two actions give life meaning. One is bearing witness to the suffering of others, to acknowledge and comfort them, to militate against dire circumstances, so that your suffering, too, may count. The other is imagining a brighter future, a better, more engaged, equitable way of being — what we can imagine we might yet be.

Without vision, we remain victims.

If we engage empathy and imagination fully now, in the midst of this pandemic, we live richly, humanly, hopefully, despite our sorrows and fears and our confinement, despite our age and inevitable losses. We reach out to one another empathically across divides. We bind to the life force, beleaguered by our own neglect, yet present, and longing to be embraced.

*Karen Malpede is a playwright, writer, director and professor. She is the co-founder, together with her partner George Bartenieff of Theater Three Collaborative. They will do a live reading of her ecofeminist climate fiction drama, Other Than We, on July 26 on Andrew Revkin's "Sustain What? Sunday Arts" program.*



SUE BRISK

## ANTI-RACIST HOTLINE WITH REVEREND BILLY

Dear Rev Billy,  
I write to confess my sins. I frequently attend Black Lives Matter protests and I believe I understand the stakes involved in the movement. Black Americans are fighting for their lives against systemic racism. But I also have another motive. I'm single, and it is very hard to meet people these days. Should I feel guilty for hoping I might find love among my fellow demonstrators?

— PAUL, LES

Dear Paul,  
Let's start with a famous quote from Emma Goldman: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution." Guilt is old manure that doesn't even stink anymore. It's a nonsense emotion leftover from Puritans who died centuries ago. Puritans who died from the disease called NOT DANCING.

Dead emotions, like guilt and sentimentality and jealousy — they are dangerous only in that they are empty containers that capture anything funky that comes their way, usually neurotic fear.

Example: Lots of guilty liberals keep their racism alive by arranging their guilt with conspicuous charity. They put off an honest look at themselves that might go deep, hurt, and change them. And like Emma says, a hook up and a demo are how you take the mountain by strategy.

• • •

Hi Billy,  
I am a part of a large Irish Catholic family, only I am adopted and its sole Black member. Recently, a relative of mine forwarded an email to me and the rest of the family that, mixing cherry-picked facts with a whole lot of myth, claimed

that the Irish were once slaves and that they were treated worse than Africans in the Americas. It concludes by using the phrase "Irish Lives Matter."

It's not the first quasi-racist email I've received from this branch of the family. I don't think they even understand how hurtful it is to see that garbage in my inbox. What is my obligation here? I want to educate them but I feel like if they loved me they would educate themselves and stand by me in the cause of racial justice.

— LINDA, Dumbo

Linda,  
No! You have absolutely no obligation of any kind. And it seems triply inconsiderate that this challenge to you would happen now, as Black Lives Matter is as sorrowing as it is angry, remembering the murders — "Say Their Names!"

Why would someone choose to be competitive, intruding into your claim on long-sought justice with their own historical grievance? This is an extreme case of white fragility. And do you really need them? Your letter suggests that they live at a distance from you. Good. Just turn away. If you did reach some sort of détente with them, their love for you would always be conditional. Let them go. Find your love in people who affirm justice as a generating basis of that love.

Amen?

— REV

REVEREND BILLY IS PASTOR OF THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING. HAVE A QUESTION FOR THE REVEREND? JUST EMAIL REV.BILLY@INDYPENDENT.ORG & UNBURDEN YOUR SOUL.

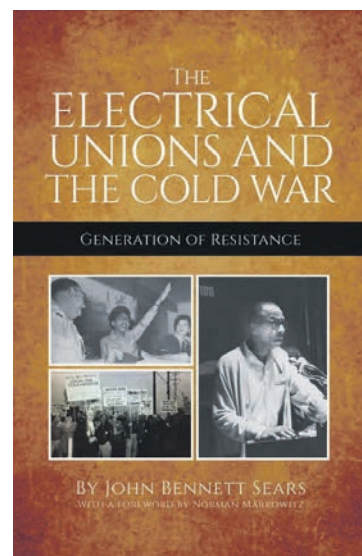
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FOR HOW WE CAN SURVIVE IN THE COVID-19 ERA.**

**STAY TUNED.**